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OF CONCEPTS AND METHODS

ON 'POSTISMS' AND OTHER ESSAYS



K. MURALI (AJITH)

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by K.Murali (Ajith)

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"Communism
is the riddle of history solved,
and it knows itself to be this solution."

Karl Marx

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Introduction

From the October Revolution to the Naxalbari Movement: Understanding Political Subjectivity

Saroj Giri*

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The first decade since the October Revolution of 1917 was an extremely fertile period in Russia. So much happened in terms of contesting approaches and divergent paths to socialism and communism that we are yet to fully appreciate the richness, intensity and complexity of the time.

In particular, what is called the Soviet revolutionary *avant garde* (DzigaVertov, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, Boris Arvatov) was extremely active during the 1920s. Some of them were artists who denounced (bourgeois sentimental) painting and for whom art was indistinguishable from artistic labour. They gave a call for the rejection of representation in favour of construction, privileging space and geometry, texture and tectonics. They were not some predictable leftists calling for "socialising aesthetics." Nor were they calling for the depiction of labour or the working life in the theatrical stage or in art—which would take us to the logic of representation, to reformism. Thus Alexei Gan declared in 1922: "The proletarian revolution has bestirred human thought and has struck home at the holy relics and idols of bourgeois spirituality. *Not only the ecclesiastical priests have caught it in the neck, the priests of aesthetics have had it too."*[1]

For Boris Arvatov, a work of art is now a practical object, like a piece of wood for the carpenter—palpable, geometric, rich in texture and form, non-representational, admitting of an almost elemental

1 Alexei Gan, "From Speculative Activity of Art to Socially Meaningful Artistic Labour" (1922), in John E. Bowlt, Russian Art of the Avant Garde: 1902-1934, Viking Press, New York, 1976, p. 223.

relationship between the carpenter and wood.[2] For the proletarian artist, a book does not just contain "ideas" about the coming victory of the working class, etc., but, as El Lissitzky famously declared, the book itself (as thing, as object) must be transformed.

"It is my belief," wrote Lissitzky in 1926,"that the thoughts we drink from the book with our eyes must be poured over every visible shape. The letters and punctuation marks, which introduce order to thoughts, must also be taken into account." He proposed the "book of the future": "There are today two dimensions to the word. As sound it is a function of time; as exposition, of space. The book of the future must be both. This is how to overcome the automatism of the contemporary book. A world-view which has become automatic ceases to exist in our senses, so we are left drowning in a void."[3]

What took place was a powerful proletarian maelstrom in the world of objects and material, perhaps best captured in a memorable phrase used by Arvatov at the time: the "object as comrade." One should not, however, assume that this transformation is all about objects and materials, to the exclusion of the self and the political subject. Indeed, it is as much about the political subject, the comrade or communist militant.

As we will see here, this phrase and the immense practice behind it allows us to develop, a full hundred years later (!), a very specific and determinate idea of the revolutionary *comrade*—which we will term "comrade as object." The Bolshevik "object as comrade" now gets conjugated with "comrade as object," in a very determinate, concrete sense. This will have important implications for the question of agency, revolutionary subjectivity, the vanguard Party and so on. We will approach this question through an engagement with a real, living struggle today: the self-destitution and self-objectification of the Maoist revolutionary comrade in the Naxalbari armed struggle.

2 See Arvatov, Art and Production (1926), in John Roberts and Alexei Penzin, eds., Art and Production, Pluto Press, London, 2017.
3 El Lissitzky, "The Future of the Book" (1926), *New Left Review* (Jan-Feb 1967), p. 41.

This essay can therefore be read as a long meditation on the following observation by K. Murali (Ajith): "unlike the old communist movement, its (Maoist movement's) founder leaders like Charu Mazumdar and Kanhai Chatterjee had an unwavering orientation of going to the bottommost levels of society, integrating with them and leading their struggle for the seizure of political power." What is at stake here is the nature of revolutionary subjectivity of the comrade, of the communist militant: what we will term, the "comrade as object." But we cannot talk about the subject without the object: hence we will enter into this theme of political subjectivity, viz., "the comrade as object," through the quintessential communist/Bolshevik idea (and practice) of "the object as comrade."

We will also see that the communist notion of "object as comrade" allows us to better appreciate some strands of the debates during the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the 1960s: in particular, the extremely crucial question of the material conditions for the reproduction of a *new* bourgeoisie internal to "socialism," and which destroys the Revolution from within. This pertains to the perennial question about Revolution vs. Counter-Revolution, pointing towards a Marxist understanding of the capitalist restoration in China.

It will be seen that Mao's extremely rich notion of contradiction provides the theoretical arsenal to address some of the challenges to social theory posed by contemporary movements like the Black Lives Matter, from within the milieu of revolutionary Marxism.

The "Cheeseness" of Cheese

The idea of the "object as comrade" is attributed to Boris Arvatov who disagreed with the views of the "Marxist friend," Leon Trotsky, as expressed in the latter's well-known 1923 essay called "What is Proletarian Culture and Is It Possible?"[4] Arvatov's response is the essay, "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing," where he makes an indirect reference to Trotsky's supposed abandonment

[4] Leon Trotsky, "What is Proletarian Culture and Is It Possible?" (1923), posted at https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1923/art/tia23c.htm.

of historical materialism.[5] Arvatov turns his attention to ordinary items like a cigarette lighter, a coat holder, an umbrella, the use of glass and steel in buildings—the everyday world of things, objects and humans(*assemblage)* that we inhabit. We use and consume such objects or commodities. This involves the exchange of money and goods.

A socialist society must however ask the question: How can you use the objects or commodities in such a way that you "directly" consume the use value without replicating what Marx called the fetishistic powers of the object or commodity?[6] Posing this question provides a glimpse of other possibilities that can take us beyond the logic of capitalist commodity production. This is one way in which Arvatov's "object as comrade" enters the picture—as challenging the "power of the commodity," a kind of Brechtian re-functioning (*umfunktionierung*) of the (pre-socialist) object.[7]

Keti Chukrov explains the "object as comrade":

> In this [proletarian]economy, the object became the tautological realisation of its idea—as if it were possible to imagine the chairness of a chair or to wear the coatness of a coat. Interestingly, this applied even to food, which had to be healthy, but deprived of any specific gourmet features, meaning that one had to eat the cheeseness of cheese—i.e., one kind of it, not its varieties.[8]

[5] Boris Arvatov, "Everyday life and the culture of the thing," *October*, Vol. 81 (Summer, 1997), pp. 119-128.
[6] See K. Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, Part One—in particular the discussion on "commodity fetishism."
[7] Brecht's notion of 'refunctioning' can be understood as transformation or radical change through inciting internal possibilities or immanent tendencies. It is akin to putting the 'eye in the matter' (a favourite theme of the revolutionary *avant garde*), where subjectivity is perfectly in tune with the object-world, technical apparatuses and actual conditions of the present. It entails a minimalist subjectivity, which is yet able to liminally inaugurate the 'new' by refunctioning what exists. Walter Benjamin discusses this notion in his 1934 lecture, 'The Author as Producer'.
[8] Keti Chukhrov, "Sexuality in a Non-Libidinal Economy," *e-flux Journal* #54, April 2014, posted at https://www.e-flux.com/journal/54/59833/sexuality-in-a-non-libidinal-economy/.

What we have is this: consuming the cheeseness of cheese without getting distracted by the "brand" or the flash value, by the "varieties." The "object" or "thing" lucidly speaks to the cooperative activity through which it is brought to life—which is directly connected with the "cheeseness of cheese." The commodity now does not exude fetishistic powers that serve to suppress the cooperative production process from view and push the "social" to the unconscious.

But are we then talking about a "pure use value" (only the "cheeseness") approach which, as one can imagine, smacks of a functional, instrumentalist relationship? The focus on the "bare" cheeseness or coatness of cheese or coat seems to lead us to a world bereft of aesthetics or symbolism (ah, "fetishism" is where all the fun is, right?)—is that where the vaunted "consciousness of social productive activity" finally leads us? This is an important question. For parallels, let us start by saying that raising the aesthetics question is a bit like asking "where is the (much-needed) idealism?"—a bit like asking for the tabooed forbidden fruit, but nevertheless a question Marx posed in his critique of Feuerbach's materialism, by pointing towards Hegel.

Marx pointed to how materialism failed to account for activity, the living practical activity, labour, which was accounted for by idealism. Spirit or activity, or in our case aesthetics (or design) must also be accounted for by materialism—that is, materialism should not be one-dimensional. "Cheeseness of cheese" surely tastes better when it comes with the guilty pleasures of idealism and fetishism, a kind of transgression of the one-sided Feuerbachian materialism!

Idealism of Things

Hence the Marxist answer: the "idealism" must come from matter itself! The object meant for consumption is a material thing. The fulfillment of use value is not just about the consumer and the "satisfaction of wants" but about the object in terms of its real material qualities—like the piece of wood in an elemental relationship with the carpenter. That is, now the productive activity actually takes into

account the material itself: this is the move from representation to construction, from image to geometry, without one moment sacrificing the aesthetics and, if you please, the "pleasures of idealism." But, how do you achieve that?

How can Marx's central insight emanating from his critique of Feuerbachian materialism help us breathe life into the everyday culture of the thing and the object? This, here, is the fantastic breakthrough achieved in the heydays or heady days of the Soviet Revolution. This is what was proposed: Instead of going over to the fetishistic powers of the commodity, one had to go towards the "hidden" engineering/artistic powers of things, objects and materials: this would, as it were, allow the object to commune and speak, providing us *the first contours of the "object as comrade."* What was previously suppressed or, as it were, "operated from the back," remained unconscious, will now be foregrounded, made conscious, as part of an aesthetic interplay. El Lissitzky's "book of the future" and Arvatov's piece of wood for the carpenter provide illustrations.

Recall here Dziga Vertov's fantastic use of the movie camera, the *kino*-eye.[9] Vertov consciously drove his camera to go beyond the human eye, capturing images and real life from "impossible" angles and perspectives. These new vistas were hitherto the "optical unconscious," a term suggested by Benjamin.[10] But now, in the light of the revolution, the optical unconscious became available to aesthetics and art. It is as though the Unconscious is the subtle and fragile Muse of the artist, engineer and poet rolled into one.

We find similar ideas in Walter Benjamin's famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."[11] It also helps to keep in mind that this "mechanical" also includes the iconic jerky and "disjointed" movements we find in Charlie Chaplin's movies. "Mechanical reproduction" opens up immense possibilities. It is the domain of the new political aesthetics, challenging the notion of

[9] Dziga Vertov, *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929).
[10] See Walter Benjamin, "A Little History of Photography" (1931), in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, Part 2: 1931-1934, Harvard University Press, 1999.
[11] Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935).

"aura" of the aristocracy as well as the then emerging Nazi appropriation of aesthetics. Benjamin held that the Marxist practice of art and politics must be liberated from the Nazi notion of "the total function of art."[12] This involves production, labour, engineering, *in art, as art*: the "object as comrade" being integral to this political battle.

Arvatov knew well that the fetish powers of the commodity defined an idealism and a "social" which went on to define not the individual as the (revolutionary) comrade, but the individual as the antecedently individuated (petty bourgeois) "self." He pointed out: "the idealism of Things as a private, but socially and psychologically dominant, relation to the world is the characteristic mark of bourgeois idealism in general." [13]This is however a kind of idealism that defines a particular notion of the (*faux*) social underpinned by the individual as consumer: the "social" of the idealism of Things. This consumer is precisely the one who can consume the "cheeseness" of cheese only if it comes with the fetish powers of the commodity!

Marx and Fetishism

As Alfred Sohn Rethel has shown, now you have a *faux social*, constituted through the exchange relation where the act is social while the mind is private, focused on the consumption of private owners. This idea is implied in a key insight of Marx in *Capital*: under capitalist commodity production, the relationship between humans now appears as the relationship between things, thereby repressing real social bonds. This "relationship between things" is surely a relationship, a bond of sorts that generates a particular kind of social: a "social" constituted by humans who relate to each other only through the immediate consciousness of the act of exchange as private owners, and a non-knowledge of the real social relationship between humans. This non-knowledge of the larger social relationship is as essential as the "immediate consciousness," for exchange

[12] The "total function of art" is a key Nazi notion. No wonder, Nazis massively made use of cinema as a "total medium" to win over the masses.
[13] Boris Arvatov, op. cit., p. 123.

to effectively take place. This combination of non-knowledge and immediate consciousness produces what Sohn-Rethel calls the "practical solipsism" of individuals in the act of exchange.[14]

This is the (faux) social invoked, for example, in Thomas Friedman's uber-neoliberal statement that no two countries with McDonalds in them would go to war! Or when psychiatrists advise their patients, not without a sense of irony, to go shopping in order to feel better: here the "social" is not just what you get through the relations of exchange of the market but one emanating from what Marx in *Capital* called the "fetish powers of the commodity."[15] In this case, Marx has in mind not the capitalist of the "classical type" (for whom consumption is a sin) but the modernised capitalist (permitting of consumption).[16]

Consumption is not wasteful expenditure, it is not anti-production, but now comes into the chain of production, like a mirror image of production. The commodity attends to the feeling of de-alienation, providing a sense of relief and freedom, achieved through pushing the (real) social away into the unconscious, hence producing the faux social. There is alienation, but also the *lure of alienation*, freedom within alienation, pathetically reinscribing, redoubling alienation. The commodity literally trades in and re-monetises alienation. Such is the Idealism of things, the Idealism of the fetishised object.

[14] See Alfred Sohn Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands, N. J., 1978, p. 43.
[15] Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1.
[16] Marx writes: "While the capitalist of the classical type brands individual consumption as a sin against his function and as "abstinence" from accumulating, the modernised capitalist is capable of looking upon accumulation as abstinence from pleasure" (*Capital*, Vol. 1, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1954, p. 556).

What we need to keep in mind however is that capital of both the types could be simultaneously at work. Take corporate plunder, say, in mining in areas like Gadchiroli or Bastar in India, or mining for precious metals like tantalum and cobalt used in digital gadgets, in African countries—here we see how this "classical type" of rapacious "primitive accumulation" underwrites the advanced tech capitalism of the Silicon Valley. Thus, anti-Trump Apple CEO, Tim Cook, might oppose the "Muslim ban," but it is not difficult to see why this is no more than virtue-signaling.

Against this is *the anti-commodity "object as comrade"* of the October Revolution. "Object as comrade" satisfies a need and has the effect of bringing to view the real social, taking us that much closer to the idea of "the society of associated producers." This opens up *a new communication, a refreshing way of being*.

Another way of highlighting our argument is this: "Object as comrade" allows us to appreciate what can be called the joyful *Necessity of the social* rather than the social as always an oppressive structure to be silenced, but obviously not eliminated—a necessary evil which therefore gets pushed to the bellicose unconscious.

Freud's notion of "repression" appears on very weak ground here. Fulfilment of desire, pleasure, satisfaction—this is understood by Freudian psychoanalysis in terms of the "self" as opposed to the "social." But the self and its desires and pleasures cannot be detached from the social. In fact, they can exist in a continuum with the social, such that having acknowledged the necessity of the social, de-alienation in its true Marxist avatar no longer involves the generation of a private self which counterposes the individual against society, nor does it allow for the commodification of alienation as a way out of alienation. In the world of Marx's real social, which is another name for the "society of associated producers," the individual is not pathologically pitted against society. The "unconscious" loses much of its power, thereby radically transforming "psychoanalysis" itself!

Lo-and-behold, it turns out that it is *not the individual as such*, but it is *the (faux) social itself which needed liberation*, breaking out of the particular mold within which psychoanalysis kept it captive. Once this happens, the individual or the self can seek liberation without getting into the rut of the alienation-dealienation syndrome. The "object as comrade" speaks to such a possibility. Such a critique of psychoanalysis is partly developed by Lev Vygotsky.[17]

"De-class," "De-personify"

The "object as comrade" is ripe with another possibility, another

[17] See Lev Vygotsky, "The Problem of Speech and Thinking in Piaget's Theory," https://www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/works/words/ch02.htm.

iteration, now as its obverse. And this will allow me to come to our central focus on the subject, the political subjectivity of the Maoist militant.

This is where I now invite you to a new idea: the "comrade as object"—yes, the comrade, a living human being, the revolutionary, as "object!" Before stunning or perhaps scandalising readers by thinking of a radiant revolutionary comrade as "an object," I must confess to something. I had always liked the comparison of the comrade with a fish in water. Mao pointed this out, that the communist must be among the masses, like fish in water.[18] All revolutionary movements want to keep this in mind for their own good.

It is not about coming "down" to the level of the masses—that would be self-righteous condescension. The masses are instead "higher," since they are like the real social, one corresponding to the "object as comrade." But a part of me might rise in protest: we are not fish, we are humans, hence why should one be generalised into the masses? Is this not another "communist ploy" to level out the creative powers and "inequalities" of humans and level them all into flat automatons?!! Not at all.

The comparison with fish and the injunction to be among the masses like fish in water, is not about inflating any generic inflated ego of the revolutionary "subject." It is about breaking with the so-called creative uniqueness of the "individual" who is fatally nourished by the fetishistic powers of the commodity, by the oppressive logic of capitalist production. From the petit-bourgeois perspective, Mao's comrade does seem to be nothing but a lifeless automaton—but that precisely is the point. Breaking with the solipsistic consciousness of commodity fetishism, now the "new" individual, the comrade as object, must tend towards what appears like "an object," something we already see being suggested in Mao's fish metaphor.

So after all, my proposition of "comrade as object" is less scandalous than it first appears!

[18] Mao, "Beat Back the Attack of the Bourgeois Rightists," July 9, 1957, in https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_65.htm.

We are also familiar with the idea of Party workers/leaders trying to "de-class"—a bit of a worn-out cliché today, perhaps carrying many perversions. At its best, "de-class" is not about de-socialising, about turning into a cold automaton. It is about re-socialising, of connecting to what, for Marx, would be the real social, the social which can only exist as the suppressed unconscious under capitalism. "De-class" uplifts, elevates. De-class and de-personification, what is pejoratively called "a total identification with the Cause," could be a process of challenging the psychic investments into the "idealism of the Thing."

"De-class" and "de-personification" then can be seen as a process of casting off the spell of idealism and fetishisms, and opening up the aesthetic interplay of the social unconscious now de-pathologised and liberated.[19] The "de-classed comrade" now stands for the possibility of a new way of relating, a new way of doing things, overturning the existing fetishisms of capital. But he would have perhaps made himself less sentimental, more hardened—reminding us of Lenin's famous response recounted by Maxim Gorky as to why Lenin would rather not listen to a certain kind of music, the Beethoven sonatas. Such music, Lenin quipped, "makes one want to say kind, stupid things and stroke the heads of those who, living in such a foul hell, can create such beauty... Hmm, our task is infernally hard."

Self-Destitution of the Comrade

The "comrade as object" is a continuation of de-classing and de-personification, now taken to the point of revolutionary destitution, involving the courage to die, death. To the extent that the comrade is a living human being, his or her objectification will and must involve the openness to death. Life is hanging in a balance, and the vulnerability to death is a constant presence. You are never safe and the willingness to sacrifice life is best embraced graciously. It is not

[19] Recall here Walter Benjamin's "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction" where he counter-poses fascist aesthetics with the political aesthetics of communism.

about valorising sacrifice and martyrdom, but about the self-destitution of the revolutionary communist. Think of Saroj Dutta from the Naxalite movement during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Read these lines which capture his life as a Naxalite:

> Sometimes I feel that I am treading a dangerous path,
> At night at the hypnotic call of some spirit.
> On waking up I will realise with a shudder,
> That I have not a single fellow-traveler in the world.[20]

Loneliness, danger and death—such is the path Dutta and others like him have chosen, or if not "chosen," now find themselves in. Let us say that, what s/he subjects her/himself to, is revolutionary *self*-destitution, self-objectification. A specific, individual life, a unique human being, is now an object, a mere object who can be taken down any time.

It is as though *as object*, or in the moment of self-objectification, the comrade or comrade-subject can immerse among the masses, exploring or discovering what would remain inaccessible to other "great" leaders of the masses. Such "great" leaders or activists would know only what we have called the "faux social," the "social" as the repressed unconscious. Their leadership or activism would be representational and abstract, their ideological radicalism a sign of their disconnect from the real social. Just as Vertov uncovered and played with the optical unconscious, now turned into a Muse, the "comrade as object," yes precisely, *as object*, grasps the possibility of emancipation from within the bosom of the "real social." The "comrade as object" does not just connect to the masses, but his life inhabits and engenders the real social, prefiguring the society-to-come.

There is no eulogising the masses, as such—"masses" must also self-destruct in the good old dialectical tradition of "One divides into Two." Uncovering the "real social" entails challenging the basis of capital in the exploitation of not labour as such (in the sense of a

[20] Saroj Dutta quoted in Subharanjan Dasgupta, "The Cultural-Creative Dimension of the Naxalite Movement" (2017) inhttp://www.mcrg.ac.in/RLS_PML/RLS_PM/RLS_PM_Abstracts/Subhoranjan_2017.pdf.

pre-Marxist socialist notion of "labour"), but "labour-power" (in the properly Marxist sense): this follows from what is called the "dual or two-fold character" of labour which is fundamental to Marx's critique of political economy, marking it off from the labour theory of value as was already propounded by those like David Ricardo.[21]

No theory of class struggle can forget this dual character of labour—otherwise, class struggle ultimately becomes a formalistic "trade unionism," leading either to the notion of the undifferentiated revolutionary mass, so dear to Hugo Chavez-kind of revolutionary populisms, the capitalo-parliamentary notion of the "electorate," so dear to social democracy, or, to the notion of labour as a segmented group, as though "a worker" is an identity in the manner of "identity politics."[22] In the latter case, "labour" is seen as another iteration in the series of other identities or "marginalised" groups, like queer, immigrant, women, *Dalit*, black and so on. These are all anti-Marxist tendencies within the left, whose crowning glory should perhaps go to the influential theory of intersectionality in gender theory.[23] It is not enough then that the "comrade as object" relates to the "masses" now as "labour," but labour itself must undergo a dialectical implosion as suggested by Marx.

So what do we have here? The activist-comrade *as object* is still a Subject—a subject who perhaps speaks in the name of History and invokes the "metanarrative" of the "stages of History," but whose self-destitution and self-objectification open up a revolutionary pos-

[21] In a Letter to Engels dated August 24, 1867, Marx writes: "The best points in my book are: 1. (this is fundamental to all understanding of the *facts*) the *two-fold character of labour* according to whether it is expressed in use-value or exchange-value, which is brought out in the very *First* Chapter," (https://marxists.catbull.com/archive/marx/works/1867/letters/67_08_24.htm).

[22] There is the danger of revolutionary populism, as I pointed out with regard to "Venezuelan socialism" in "Capitalism Expands but the Discourse is Radicalized: Whither "21st Century Venezuelan Socialism?" *Critical Sociology*. 2013; 39 (1): 21-36. doi:10.1177/0896920511434216.

[23] On gender and intersectionality, Maya John made an important Marxist intervention. Even though I have reservations about some of the details of her argument, I would still recommend it. See Maya John, "Critiquing Intersectionality, Populism and Gender Disembodied of Class: A Marxist Reassertion" (June 10, 2013), posted at http://sanhati.com/excerpted/7237/,

sibility by creating a null point, a void in History itself.[24] Such is the radical power of the "comrade as object." The self-annulment of one's Self, the threat of physical annihilation is most artfully deployed to effectively challenge the inexorable logic of History and of Capital and State—for the comrade here stands face to face with the Necessity imposed by Capital and State.

The "face to face" needs to be clarified. As a contrast, think of "postcolonial autonomy" or the subaltern subject's "radical alterity" challenging "Eurocentrism."[25] Such "alterity" or "subalternity" (to use the jargon of postcolonial theory) does not however mark a null point in History and only defines an enclave in the awning of the great edifice of Capital and State. This enclave gets extolled as counter-history, as counter-power, but it does not confront the Inexorable Logic and supposed Necessity of Capital, and only bypasses it. It is a "live and let live" scenario: the subaltern subject finally becomes an internal moment of capital. Elsewhere, I have tried to show that the post-colonial immigrant in the United States is actually allied with Silicon Valley tech-capitalism against the black majority: what I have called the Capitalist International of the Postcolonial Immigrant and Silicon Valley.[26] Hence I do not rule out the following scene: A bunch of postcolonial immigrant CEOs are "anti-racist" only to uphold something like their self-centered "right to entrepreneurship," in a way which overrides or appropriates the black people's struggle for basic survival and dignity.

Or, consider today's prevalent "cancel culture" and privi-

[24] The void as the "path," the rupture/opening to a "new world" can be found in the Buddha's *nibbana*. *Nibbana* is often known as Awakening or Enlightenment, but actually *nibbana* is, in the first instance, extinction, the blowing out, the vanishing. That is also the meaning of the term in Pali. I have engaged with the Buddhist revolutionary self in "The Buddhist Ineffable Self and a Possible Indian Political Subject," *Political Theology*, 19:8, 2018; 734-750, DOI: 10.1080/1462317X.2018.1537583.

[25] For example, among the postcolonial theorists. See Homi Bhabha's emphasis on radical alterity in his *The Location of Culture*. London; New York: Routledge, 1994.

[26] I tried to address some of this in my contribution "Parasitic Anti-colonialism," in Jela Krecic, ed., *The Final Countdown: Europe, Refugees and the Left*, Berlin, 2017.

lege-checking. The "woke radical" of today will perhaps scoff at the Marxist revolutionary comrade and only see an inflated Subject in it, as abstract and "straight" as the representations produced by Capital and the Racist Cis-heteronormative State.[27] But now we know: the political subjectivity at stake here is not about privilege at all, but *a different way of being, involving a different modality of life and death*. We see this in the life of Kanhai Chatterji, Kishenji, Azad, Charu Majumdar, Naveen Babu, and many others.

Charu Majumdar's *tapas*

When Charu Majumdar wrote that you (the revolutionary) must "dip your hands in the blood of the enemies," we know that it was as much about self-destitution as about killing the other, the "class enemy"—it is not just "other-directed" but "self-directed," inwardly directed, almost marking a moment of self-transformation. Mahatma Gandhi emphasised the interconnection between non-violence and *tapas* (Sanskrit/Pali word for "self-purification through internal churning"), while for Majumdar the interconnection is between "revolutionary violence" and *tapas* (Majumdar, unlike Gandhi, did not use this word, but carried the sense of it). *Tapas* here is about the willingness to die, to have the courage to die *in self-destitution*. Can *tapas* exist without courage, and what is courage if it is not courage in the face of death? Majumdar states:

> Only by waging class struggle—the battle of annihilation—the new man will be created, the new man who will defy death and will be free from all thoughts of self-interest. And with this death defying spirit he will go close to the enemy…[28]

The "new man," "free from all thoughts of self-interest" and,

[27] Recall the many times in India, intellectuals have tried to present the Maoists as the mirror image of the capitalist State. I have elsewhere tried to debunk such false equivalences.

[28] Charu Majumdar, "Hate, Stamp and Smash Centrism" (May 1970), posted at https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mazumdar/1970/05/x01.htm.

"death-defying spirit": all this points to "a battle of annihilation" which is as much against the class enemy as about forging a new revolutionary will. Annihilation of the other is associated with the annihilation of a particular self. In fact, this "particular self" will be seen by Majumdar as contiguous to the pernicious tendency of revisionism within the Communist movement, and, contiguous too with what Arvatov called the Idealism of Things, Charu Majumdar's "line of annihilation" is a pedagogical practice involving self-destitution.[29] He imagined that such a revolutionary practice would lead to the transformation of the Communist movement and a way out of the morass of parliamentarism, reformism, compromise and tailism.

The term "new man" is a misnomer though. "Man," as say in the "rights of man," is a petit-bourgeois ideological construct, abstract and universalist. There is nothing called "man" or for that matter "woman" in the abstract. Majumdar's "new man," however, cannot be detached from material practice, from revolutionary activity. The "new man" is subjected to objectification and is "an object," a self-destituted subject with the courage to die. The struggle for the birth of "new men" cannot be detached from the revolutionary struggle or the material conditions. With the Arvatov-Trotsky debate, we know that eventually the unpacking of fetishistic bourgeois universalism and the anti-Marxist humanism of the "new man" turns on the question of the relationship between ideology (or ideological commitment) and material practice, socialist ideology and a new socialist object-culture, the new socialist "thing."

Revolutionary will and "death-defying spirit" cannot hang in thin air. Without the *object itself as your "comrade,"* socialism—and not just the "new man"—is on very shaky ground. The "new man" must not lead to an individualist, bloated, self-righteous Leader whose "self-sacrifice" and supposed "self-destitution" might, in a blighted twist, end up being the new idiom of repressive power. That

[29] A recent article highlights this point about the theme of the "new man" in Charu Majumdar, but does not develop it. See Rajeshwari Dasgupta, "Towards the "New Man": Revolutionary Youth and Rural Agency in the Naxalite Movement," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 41, No. 19 (May 13-19, 2006), pp. 1920-1927.

is why *the "comrade as object" must be seen in an integral relationship with material practice, with "object as comrade."*

Without, say, a Benjaminian political aesthetics or a Vertovian interplay of the optical unconscious, without, that is, the materialist notion of "object as comrade," the implications would be terrible: the "comrade as object" will sooner or later turn into the great Leader whose socialist ideological "commitment" might be nothing but bombast and bluster.[30] That is why we must admit that revolutionary self-destitution must be one which embraces the full implications of the "object as comrade," which would provide not just the correct political economy approach, but also a solid relationship with everyday material culture.

When Kishenji and Azad were killed by the state forces, I felt deeply disturbed and angry. I expressed some of it back then.[31] But only now, I know more clearly what they showed us: a different way of being, a revolutionary subject as the product of self-objectification and self-destitution—the "comrade as object."

Outside of Capital and State

The Naxalite confronts State and Capital and their manufactured Necessity. The Naxalite stands in its tracks as the ultimate opposition, who puts everything at stake and stands completely outside of all the determinations of this Necessity. Parliamentary

[30] While sacrifice or self-destitution of the comrade must not be made into another basis for the cult of power, we must avoid the tendency of trying to "balance" it out with somehow trying to show that the comrade's life was not so "sad" after all, and was full of exhilaration, pleasure and fun. Arundhati Roy seems to do such a "balancing" in her essay on Anuradha Ghandy. Roy says that she was "a little puzzled at the constant references that people who knew her (Ghandy) made to her "sacrifices."" Then she says that, "to me, however... Ghandy was no saint or missionary." We know what Roy is getting at; she is trying to be critical of those who she thinks focus one-sidedly on "sacrifice" Roy fails to fully appreciate the range of emotions, feelings and affect contained in "sacrifice." Saroj Dutta's poems might clarify things for Roy. (Foreword to *Scripting the Change: Selected Writings of Anuradha Ghandy*, Daanish Books, Delhi, 2011, p. xii).

[31] "The Killing of Azad," (July 12, 2010), http://sanhati.com/excerpted/2554/. "Kishenji: not just another martyr," (Nov 28, 2011), http://sanhati.com/articles/4377/.

elections and India's electoral democracy were one such "determination." Thus the Naxalite always called for the boycott of parliamentary elections.[32] People talk about this "boycott call" in terms of whether elections can be used for revolutionary purposes or not—can we not tactically use elections in order to prepare for revolution, or at least increase our visibility? Those who want to participate in elections will say, for example, that one need not throw the baby with the bathwater.

But the rationale of "election boycott" can be grasped only in a different frame. The Naxalite "comrade as object" belongs to the outside, it is the null point of the entire system, including the electoral democracy, rights and the reservations it offers. The Naxalite cannot take the carrot and complain about the stick. Capital today proposes democracy—indeed democracy is clearly the emblem under which Capital expands its Rule.[33] The Rule of Capital is also the Rule of Democracy. The "comrade as object" who wants to frontally stall the march of Capital and the State cannot rely on the "carrot": h/she must be in the Outside, *must be the Outside*, Outside of all the determinations of Capital and the State.[34] (I hope the reader will know that there are many so-called Maoists who are no longer the

[32] On the line of boycott of parliamentary elections, one can look at the many documents produced by the Party.

[33] Many Marxists are gravely mistaken in treating democracy as what will counter the so-called "excesses" of capitalism, for example, when they suggest "deepening democracy" in order to resist neoliberalism. How can one fight the "excesses" without fighting capitalism itself—or how can one conceptually separate the two, even if at the level of a pure empiricism one could do so? The false notions of "excesses" and of "neoliberalism" seem to suggest that they are temporary deviations from some ideal or less harsh form of capitalism. They work towards putting a non-existent life into capitalist democracy when none exists. David Harvey's work suffers from this serious problem. I identified this problem in his disciple Naomi Klein's famous book *The Shock Doctrine*. See Saroj Giri, "Interrogating Klein's *Shock Doctrine*." *Human Geography*. 2010; 3(3):116-128. doi:10.1177/194277861000300308.

[34] Of course the Naxalite position involves understanding democracy as, what Vladimir Lenin called, "the form of state," as a particular modality of capital, and not as counter-posed to capital. Unfortunately, some "Marxists" like David Harvey simulate such a counter-posing status for "democracy" by positing the idea of "excesses of capitalism," or excesses of "market fundamentalism." It is just a way to relegitimise the social democratic left and the ideology of welfare capitalism. See footnote 29.

Outside.)

The open confrontation with the Necessity is possible since now the Naxalite can attack from the Outside. It is an attack that Capital cannot in any way accommodate within itself. The subject that attacks is an object, meaning that it has de-subjectified itself beforehand, given itself over as an object, the most potent destitution, in the inauguration of a new Law, a new Necessity. This creates disarray among the ranks of the enemy. Indeed, the implied association of the Maoist/Naxalite with the forest—*raatwali* (nighttime) party, *jangalwali* (forest-dwelling) party—suggests as much.

Here the "forest" stands for the real forest, but also the inner recess of society—sharing a somewhat strange affinity with Marx's "real social." The Naxalite strikes from within the inner recess of society. The Naxalite inhabits those inner recesses. The bottom of society—which is at the same time the forest, the dark, the "masses" at the most basic level. The *Adivasi* (as the original inhabitant, outside of Necessity) is then the "natural" refuge for the revolutionary destitute: where can the Naxalite go, where is his shelter? Also: where is, on the other hand, the *Adivasi*'s political shelter?

But then the Naxalite, who often ends up dying in the forest, is also a political *Adivasi* in his/her own right. The historical *Adivasi* and the political *Adivasi* converge in their shared precarity giving a particular form and specificity to the generic "comrade as object." This convergence, at a slight remove, is also reminiscent of the figure of Bashai Tudu created by Mahasweta Devi in her novel.[35] For now the recurring and the transient converge: the historical *Adivasi* as almost timeless, while the political revolutionary is conjunctural, contingent, responding to a specific situation. No wonder, in the story, the deathless and mysteriously immortal Bashai Tudu reappears in every epoch to fight injustice. Is this not where we must place the lives and deaths of Azad, Charu Majumdar, Saroj Dutta, Kishenji, Naveen Babu? The list is long.

Murali (Ajith)'s Intervention

[35] Mahashweta Devi, *Bashai Tudu*.

Now this allows me to refer to the work by K. Murali (Ajith) that is in front of me.[36] I want to highlight something very specific in the book which connects to our notion of "comrade as object." Murali points to the ability of Maoist leaders to reach to the bottom of society, what I just called the inner recess. Our discussion above has allowed us to see the full import of this, of the kind of leaders and political subjectivity one finds among the "comrades as objects," those like Charu Majumdar or Azad. The context in the book is that Murali is addressing the criticism with regard to the Left and the Maoists, that they have failed to address the caste question in India. As we know, such a criticism of the left is ubiquitous and very predictable, thoroughly misplaced, misdirected, but not entirely wrong.

But Murali has a refreshing viewpoint, as he provides the criticism with a definitive and specific basis. He points out: "The problem with the communist movement in the past was not class organising or the development of class consciousness. It was its wrong analysis of *Dalit* landless peasants as agricultural labourer and its politics of reformism (later revisionism) that could never develop proletarian class consciousness. Though the communist party took up the struggle against caste oppression in its early period, this was guided by Gandhian *Savarna* reformism, not revolutionary Marxism. Once it turned to parliamentarism, even this was abandoned."

Murali does not make the mistake of saying that the left over-emphasised on "class" to the neglect of "caste." His argument is that the left failed to "do class" itself, gave up class struggle, and engaged in a "wrong analysis of *Dalit* landless peasants." Then he comes to the Maoist perspective on caste:

"This experience can be compared to that of the Maoist movement which emerged through the Naxalbari armed uprising of 1967. The Maoists also took a long period to recognise the specificities of social oppression and develop a correct perspective on them. But, unlike the old communist movement, its founder leaders like Charu Mazumdar and Kanhai Chatterjee had an unwavering orientation

[36] Murali (Ajith), *Of Concepts and Methods—A Critique of "Postisms" and Other Essays*.

of going to the bottommost levels of society, integrating with them and leading their struggle for the seizure of political power. This created the context for the gradual realisation of the errors in thinking on the caste question and similar issues and its rectification. Its revolutionary practice and class line had already brought forth outstanding revolutionary leaders from the most oppressed sections of our society."

What is crucial for Murali is that "its founder leaders like Charu Mazumdar and Kanhai Chatterjee had an unwavering orientation of going to the bottommost levels of society, integrating with them." One would even accuse Murali of placing too much importance on the subjective commitment of the leaders. I would advise the reader to go slow, re-read this phrase. The point is that, with the Maoist leaders, their subjective orientation towards practice is extremely crucial—and it indeed cannot be detached from their ideological positions or official position that do not exist in the abstract.

In other words, the subjective condition of revolutionary self-destitution is crucial to their ideology and practice. This provides "the context for the gradual realisation of the errors in thinking on the caste question." Maoist leaders here are different from revisionist leaders of the communist movement. For the revisionists, "Though the communist party took up struggle against caste oppression in its early period, this was guided by Gandhian *Savarna* reformism, not revolutionary Marxism." The key difference derives from the subjective orientation of the Naxalite leaders, their tendency towards what we have called "comrade as object," revolutionary self-destitution. "Ideological position on caste" is placed here in the vourtex of revolutionary practice—but this does not lead to relativism or fluidity of "position" emanating from the contingency of practice. Revolutionary self-destitution or the "comrade as object" provides "the context for the gradual realisation of the errors in thinking on the caste question and similar issues and its rectification."

Our imaginary critic will retort: revolutionary will or subjectivity, even with self-destitution, smacks of Idealism. Further that:

the "comrade as object," and the assumed closeness to death and destitution seems to be another name for the valorisation of martyrdom. For our critics, the Naxalite/Maoist "will" is opposed to "subaltern agency," as therefore invested in replicating (Western) modernity under the idiom of socialism or Maoism. Such charges against the "comrade as object" seem relevant here since Murali is trying to uphold the Maoist position against the postcolonial approach. But, as we've seen, such criticisms do not hold much water since the Naxalite's agency is *not a performative or sectional agency but it is a way of being, a self-objectification in the face of destitution*.

It might help to keep in mind that the idea of objectification and destitution is close to the idea of Fanon's idea of declivity: "an utterly naked declivity is where an authentic upheaval is born." Or when he says, "the Negro is a zone of non-being, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly declining declivity." [37]The colonised or the anti-colonial fighter being a non-being, empty, sterile is repeatedly emphasised by Fanon, perhaps to the surprise of many. Woke radicals might even find Fanon "racist!" That is why he titles his most important work as "the wretched of the earth," starkly bringing out the empty *tabula rasa* aspect, partly as a critique of the mythic pasts and imagined homes of Afrocentrist thinkers. I have engaged with this theme earlier.[38] The interested reader can have a look.

Critique of Postisms

Murali's book is a critique of what he calls "Postisms," which he mostly identifies with the approach of Postcolonial studies.

He sharply points out:

> Coming to the present, why does our "dependent, derivative" relationship to Western theory continue in the "postcolonial?" Is it merely an intellectual hangover from

[37] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press, 2004, p. 2.

[38] "Tracing Radical Subjectivity contra Stalinism, and Why This Takes Us to Fanon," *Crisis and Critique*, Volume 3, issue 1, 2016.

> our colonial past? To answer these questions we must right away get rid of the very paradigm of a "postcoloniality." No doubt, one sees variety among postcolonial thinkers on this matter. Some among them even accept the need to factor in the continuing role of imperialism. Yet, despite such gestures, this school of thought is basically predicated on the assumption that the erstwhile colonies are now independent. Even if continuing ties of dependence are acknowledged, they are considered secondary. The postcolonial paradigm is thus, in essence, the denial of the neocolonial, i.e., the continuing domination and exploitation of ex-colonies by imperialism through indirect means.

Murali wants to break with postcolonial theory's abstract categories of "East" and "West" and place them in the material conditions. Murali writes:

> Denied material reasoning by postism, we are forced to be satisfied with some mysterious attribute of the capitalist West's "universal history," something summoned up through the power of its thought tradition. Caught up in this dead end, postcolonial theory thus blocks the deepening of its own critique of capitalism's universalising claims.

Now it is true that some of these points critiquing postcolonial theory have been made by other Marxist theorists. Murali's critique stands out since he is able to speak from within the concrete practice of a movement, the Maoist movement. That is where we must keep in mind the Maoist revolutionary subject and counterpose that to the kind of "subaltern agency" or "radical alterity" postcolonial theory proposes. I hope the understanding of the Maoist revolutionary in terms of "comrade as object," one which is in turn embedded in a particular material practice, viz., that of the Bolshevik "object as

comrade" goes some way in clarifying and reaffirming Murali's project to the reader.

Ambedkar's "Broken People"

Now we must ask: is the black or the *Dalit* not already facing death, not already a destitute, produced by today's racist/casteist capitalist order? Are the "broken people" Ambedkar seeks to defend not already destitute?[39] Who seeks revolutionary self-destitution? What is their subject-position? Surely, not those who are already, socially and, in point of fact, "a broken people?" Is it a sign of upper-caste "privilege" and not so much of "sacrifice" and "dedication" to choose the path of revolutionary self-destitution? And does the self-destitution trope not carry strong elements of Brahminical ascetic rituals, if not Buddhist renunciation?

Recent theorists of Afro-pessimism like Jared Sexton and Fred Motens point to the "social death" of the black subject—their absolutely well-grounded point being that anti-black racism is the racism of all racisms.[40] Most of the anti-racist movement dilutes the specificity of the long and unholy arc of anti-black racism, often by generalising it under the rubric of "structural racism" or "white institutional racism." This means that terms like "people of color," and the recent BIPOC, are geared towards avoiding a full acknowledgement of anti-black racism among say Arabs or South Asians.

These are extremely valid questions. I had occasion earlier to reflect on the relationship of the "broken people" to revolutionary politics, particularly since the latter insists on a "maximalist" programme of revolution involving death and self-destitution. I had engaged with Ambedkar's views on this matter in his Annihilation of Caste.[41]

But here, briefly, on the basis of our discussion above, I can see the following hypothesis emerge: the destruction of the racial

[39] Ambedkar, *The Annihilation of Caste* (1936).
[40] See, for example, Fred Motens, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112:4 (2013): 737–780.
[41] "A Marxist Reading of Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*," *The Book Review*, Vol. XXXIX, New Delhi, March 2015,pp. 29-30.

capitalist-imperialist system which produced the "broken people" (like *Dalits* and Blacks), seems to "demand" the re-inscription and re-doubling of these same "broken people" now as revolutionary destitutes, the "comrade as object." I am saying this certainly with some internal trepidation. The movement is from the "broken people" to the revolutionary destitute—something pointed out by several *Dalit* radicals, that *dalam* (armed squad) members who die in the "people's war" are mostly *Dalit* or *Adivasi*. We cannot resolve this matter here. But let us keep in mind that the temptation or lure for the *Dalit* to be the "revolutionary destitute" is, however, precisely what Ambedkar would resist.

One can read the first part of Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* as precisely his well thought out position that the "broken people" should not leap into the path of the revolutionary destitute. Ambedkar wanted constitutional safeguards for the *Dalits* since they do not possess the "means of emancipation," the wherewithal necessary to be a revolutionary. The *Dalit* or the Black is first fighting for his survival, let us say, bare survival. I then also referred to the Black Panthers who also had similar thinking. The Panthers called it "Survival pending revolution"—"pending revolution" is the crucial part. As I tried to argue, with Ambedkar it seemed that "survival" carries more weight—he was far more cautious about "Revolution" than the Panthers.

In the context of Murali's essay, one should keep in mind that the Black Panthers displayed Maoist leanings, although quite erratically. Did the Black Panthers not create a hotline with Maoists in China during the early 1970s? One can recall how they were selling the *Little Red Book* of Chairman Mao in the streets of the United States. Huey P. Newton visited China in Sept 1971 and, as he recounts in his writings, he found a lot of convergence between the struggle of the Chinese people at the time and the struggle of the Black people.[42] So again, we find that the "broken people" and the Maoist line of revolution share strong bonds.

[42] Recounted in Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, Penguin, 1973.

The Cultural Revolution

Let us now turn to the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Murali devotes an entire chapter to this topic.

Recall once more Arvatov and in fact the entire Soviet *avant garde*'s emphasis on material culture. The reader might have already sensed that this concerns an important question. This is the question about the relative importance of socialist ideological commitment vis-à-vis transformed material practices in the "success of socialism." This is what the Arvatov-Trotsky debate is about.

A similar question appears in China during the period leading up to the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s.

Socialist ideology and a socialist legal framework might have been in place in China after the 1949 Revolution—but the material base was not socialist, something the Maoists started acutely realising by the 1960s. Private ownership of means of production might have been abolished, but distribution of rewards, wages and surplus product was still on the basis of the law of value.[43] Payment of wages was still on the basis of the amount of labour done, as the still operational principle of "bourgeois right" dictated. "Socialist equality" does not break with the labour theory of value. It is an internally contradictory system where "socialist equality" rests on precisely the same internal logic that produces capital!! This means that the process of subsumption of labour is hardly different from that of any "capitalist democracy." Marx's thesis of the two-fold character of labour, we noted above, still applies to this production system.

The Cultural Revolution was an attempt to address these fundamental questions, never before faced by or even posed with such clarity by any revolutionary party.

Mao held that a "new" bourgeoisie would arise from within this new material production under socialism. One surely had to focus on the dangers posed by the old bourgeoisie which, though

[43] See for example, Zhang Chunqiao, "On Exercising All-Round Dictatorship Over the Bourgeoisie, *Peking Review*, #14, April 4, 1975, pp. 5-11, posted at https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1975/PR1975-14a.htm.

weakened, still existed. But this should not lead one to overlook the rise of the new bourgeoisie specific to socialism. The infamous "capitalist roaders" were very much a product of socialism. They are not really a carry-over from the past but reproduced in the socialist present! It is a bourgeoisie specific to the working of the wage system within socialism. Mao therefore wanted to problematise the understanding of socialism as a transitory phase towards communism and the role of class struggle within it, as we find in his *Critique of Soviet Economics*.

As formulated by Mao, the Cultural Revolution then was not really about taking the struggle from material or economic realm to that of culture—unless you broaden culture to include material culture. That would be a simplistic if not an erroneous understanding, repeated by many, left, right and center. Nor is it about infinitely continuing the class struggle in the sense in which Slavoj Zizek understands it—as the fetishism or "bad infinity of struggle."[44] For it is clear that the class struggle is seen to enter into a determinate phase, viz., the one associated with the new conditions of production. It has specific determinations; for example, the fact that the bourgeoisie is to be found within the Communist Party or is reproduced from within the concrete operation of the socialist production system. Hence the slogan "Bombard the Headquarters!" The charge that the Maoist class struggle is a bad infinity, tending towards negativity without a positive moment, without specific determinations, then cannot be sustained.

One can only recall here Marx's struggle against the socialism of the Gotha Program.[45] The Gotha socialists valorised labour in such a way that, while empirically, and in terms of quantitative shares, labour got more than its "fair share" (a very bourgeois idea), what was overlooked was the process of "real abstraction" of capital. Here you have a "socialist equality" from within the framework of "bourgeois right." Such a "socialist equality" meant that the "invisible surplus"

[44] Zizek, *Mao on Practice and Contradiction* (London: Verso, 2007) p. 10.
[45] Karl Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Program" (1875), https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/

extracted from labour was never really visible and it "mysteriously" kept fattening capital—while the worker was supposed to be happy about getting a "fair share," a fair wage, or, at least, more wages than before the Revolution! Basically, the Gotha socialists overlooked the crucial distinction Marx wants to make between labour and labour-power—what is called the two-fold character of labour.

The Cultural Revolution carried forward and put into practice Marx's critique of the Gotha programme. It showed us a Revolution that goes beyond the rhetoric of "socialist equality" and rigorously builds on Marx's critique of political economy and in particular his rejection of the supposedly socialist-leaning "labour theory of value" as found in the works of Ricardo, or, even John Stuart Mill. What the Cultural Revolution achieved was not just shifting the focus from "forces of production" to "relations of production," from "production in command" to "politics in command"—the implications are wider.

Now Murali invokes these key insights of the Cultural Revolution. He refers to Mao's *Critique of Soviet Economics*. This is excellent, particularly since the Maoist movement today must enrich itself with these insights.

Black Lives Matter

But if we reject Postisms, how does one come to terms with social movements that are quite openly postist in character? Take, for example, Black Lives Matter (BLM) that raged in June 2020, which displays many of the new complexities of political movements and of politics more generally. What does the best in Maoist thinking and politics have to say about it?

The protests against the killing of George Floyd are usually all lumped under the BLM banner. The ground situation might tell a different story. This caveat must be kept in mind.

In terms of the modality of articulation of anger and rage, the Black Lives Matter movement was marked by consumerist looting and "property destruction," which seems to come close to an ambi-

ent tendency of an uprising, if not insurrection. An ambient tendency means that there might be no subjective or organised forces consciously proposing insurrection on the ground, and yet it manifests as an outer limit, as remnants from the deep memory of the legacy of the Black Panthers: the radiant embers of a long-doused fire. Black Panther militants distributing Mao's "Red Book" belongs to this deep memory. We must also be able to directly address the looting aspect, instead of disowning or downplaying it the way anti-Trump liberal commentators do. I have earlier reflected on the aspect of the looting of consumer goods during the London riots of 2009.[46]

But here is the more complex and interesting part: new forms of capital, in particular anti-Trump tech capitalists (Google, Apple, Facebook), seem to intertwine with the anti-racist and pro-immigrant struggles. Like the contemporary avatars of social democratic or welfare capitalism that are now dated, we presently have what is often called "woke capitalism." It would perhaps not be off the mark to propose that the BLM embodies this new milieu. I would venture to further propose that a large section of the BLM stood for a particular kind of performative "anti-racist" rage expressed as "cancel culture" and "privilege-checking." It wallows in "woke capitalism," this being the final destination of "identity politics" egged on by social democracy and liberal multiculturalism.

Let us say that two tendencies (the embers of the doused fire of insurrection and a fledgling "anti-racist" woke capitalism) pushed and channeled mass and popular anger against the police murder of George Floyd.

These two tendencies crisscross and converge massively, even though the brunt of police repression and long court cases will be faced by those in the former. The latter tendency will have big corporate CEOs virtue-signaling against Donald Trump and the alt-right. Jeff Bezos of Amazon and so many other Silicon Valley CEOs took the lead in this, showing their support for BLM. Alongside

[46] "London Stopped and Searched," *Mute Magazine*, London, August 16, 2011, posted at https://www.metamute.org/community/your-posts/london-stopped-and-searched

you will find "woke radicals," comprising the educated upper middle-class youth. These ones were very visible in toppling statues from city squares.[47]

We already know the pro-immigrant position of big tech companies, who actively opposed Trump's "Muslim ban," or *Twitter* fact-checking Trump's tweets and generally favouring a liberal cosmopolitan outlook.. Now I read that Facebook has removed pages of right-wing group Patriot Prayer after the Portland unrest.[48] As a result, the alt-right's version of "culture war" tries to depict all these "woke capitalists" as coming under the banner of "cultural Marxism." These "woke capitalists" might not like being called "cultural Marxists" but they surely over-indulge on a super postist version of anti-racism, anti-capitalism, anti-patriarchy, anti-authoritarianism. Google search engines are skewed towards such woke culture.

Supposedly progressive media outlets like *New York Times* and *The Guardian* will publish articles in defense of "cancel culture" and "political correctness."[49] Interestingly some famous intellectuals, including Chomsky and Salman Rushdie, in a public statement, decried this "cancel culture" as intolerant and against progressive values. But "cancel culture" and "privilege-checking" converged with the anti-racism of BLM. It is as though you cannot denounce cancel culture and yet be anti-racist—your radicalism cannot escape the "woke" test. Established radicals like Chomsky are no longer secure in their radicalism, and can be "canceled" anytime.

So we are today talking about a particular kind of anti-racism.

[47] Such protesting youth, often coming from a higher-class background than the youth who join the police, need not always be supported against the police. "Defund the police" might be appropriate in the light of police brutality itself, but there is no point defending the radical "leftist" Ivy League aristocracy whose opposition to the police might be a sign of class hatred. On this, see the short and excellent intervention by Pratyush Chandra, "Capitalism and Social Justice: The Floyd Protests in the US," June 19, 2020, posted at http://sanhati.com/excerpted/19808/.

[48] Posted at https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-global-race-protests-portland-faceboo/facebook-removes-pages-of-right-wing-group-patriot-prayer-after-portland-unrest-idUKKBN25V2U3, Sep 2, 2020.

[49] Billy Bragg, "Cancel culture" doesn't stifle debate, but it does challenge the old order," *The Guardian*, July 10, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/10/free-speech-young-people.

This "anti-racism" seems to let off a particular kind of energy or creative juices in the youth, which is quickly absorbed by today's communicative capitalism, endearing young radicals to trendy woke venture capitalists. Just wonder how many youths are already putting "active participation in BLM protests" in their job CVs—not to defy CEOs but to please them!

The term "woke" seems to have started among the black community and the rate at which it has been appropriated by "radical" upper middle class (Ivy League) youth and then by tech capitalists, only shows the extent of Postist politics today.

Our question then: Can Maoism address the kind of complexity the postist movements display?

Mao's Idea of Contradiction

We must keep in mind that Mao and the legacy of the Cultural Revolution was all about dealing with complexity, plurality and non-linearity, shifting positions and a fluid, dynamic situation. But was there anything as complex, multi-layered, fluid and so fundamentally disruptive as the period of the Cultural Revolution in China, when everything in society was open to not just "contestation" but a foundational shift? Perhaps it was the biggest mass movement in history, the movement of the people, along with tremendous explosion in poster-writing and the articulation and political expression by the lower classes and the Red Guards—not excluding the much talked about factional feuds and fights.

And the political level was very high: Key insights absolutely central to Marx's critique of political economy—like the notion of bourgeois right, wage labour, and the labour theory of value—served as the critical arsenal for those who wanted to resist the capitalist roaders. This was no "capitalism vs. socialism struggle" (Stalin vs. Churchill?) of the Cold War that usually remain at the representational highly ideological or geopolitical level. It was nothing less than "queering the Revolution" before the queer became an idiom of late capitalist counter-subjectivity.

Under the rubric of Maoist politics, social "contradiction" acquired an expansive meaning: now they are visible not only at the formal level, at the level of representation, but at the level of concrete lived material life, in multiple, pluralist ways—at the level of everyday material culture, an attempted move towards the "object as comrade." The cultural, sexual, pedagogical, economic, educational, familial, religious and mythological—all were seen to carry elements that are both internally antagonistic and non-antagonistic.

The complexity of a social situation, the articulation of difference as well as similarity, the many layers of "superstructural elements"—all these were to be grasped not in terms of an underlying logic, or a master narrative, but by fully recognising their respective autonomy as well as non-autonomy. Most often, much before one gets into this level of complexity and concrete determinations, that is, able to place one's practice and one's radical politics at this thoroughly grounded level, one already slinks out and floats back to the surface, to the familiar ideological and representational, resorting to grand empty gestures of "revolutionary politics." *The Cultural Revolution did not go in this "formalist" direction*. It did not, like many Revolutions, degenerate into a Thermidor where both "friend" and "enemy" are decided in schematic-ideological terms. Partly owing to Mao's nuanced understanding of social contradiction, "friend" and "enemy" could not easily slide into the abstract representational dimension—even though there were many instances of factional feuds and fights that degenerated into violence.

In his 1937 essay *On Contradiction* Mao famously proposed a complex understanding of contradiction. He made the distinction between the principal contradiction and the secondary contradiction, between the principal aspect and secondary aspect of each contradiction, and the uneven development of each contradiction. Mao found it important to uphold the distinction between contradiction and antagonism. Quoting Lenin, he writes, "Lenin said, "Antagonism and contradiction are not at all one and the same. Under socialism, the first will disappear, the second will remain." That is

to say, antagonism is one form, but not the only form, of the struggle of opposites; the formula of antagonism cannot be arbitrarily applied everywhere."[50]

Interestingly, these ideas found their way into Europe, primarily through the work of Louis Althusser who was majorly influenced by Mao's thought.[51] It was in appreciation of Mao's concept of contradiction that Althusser had written:

> Mao-Tse-Tung's pamphlet: *On Contradiction* (1937) contains a whole series of analyses in which the Marxist conception of contradiction appears in a quite un-Hegelian light. Its essential concepts may be sought in vain in Hegel: principle and secondary contradiction; principle and secondary aspect of the contradiction; antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradiction; law of the uneven development of a contradiction.[52]

If Althusser stood at the cusp of critical theory's Spinozoist/Nietzschean turn, then it is open for discussion where exactly the reception of Mao's theory of contradiction figures there. Is such a Spinozoist turn also to be traced in Mao's nuanced understanding of the notion of contradiction—without making Mao for that reason a Spinozoist?

Lastly, let me flag another strand here, maybe for future discussion, something which has received little attention: the relationship between the class struggle and the elemental forces of nature. The exhortatory slogans, posters, poems and songs of the Cultural Revolution constantly invoke imageries of mountains, flood, river, storm, clouds, sun, wind and so on. The "elemental" is also the elemental within the individual, the unconscious as the revolutionary Muse, or, simply, the revolutionary spirit and zeal among the masses. Consider the 1976 poster called "The Great Proletarian Cultural Revo-

[50] Mao, "On Contradiction" (1937), https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_17.htm.
[51] Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, Verso, London, 2005.
[52] Ibid., p. 94.

lution must be waged to the end."[53] What is an otherwise straightforward scene of Red Guards writing wall posters in a town square is depicted as epic and elemental. The poster conveys a political slogan, but there is no depiction of the socio-political struggle as such, the "class enemy" or feuding factions. What stands out is the fact that it is set against an epic and a quasi-cosmic background; the town square is depicted against a broad horizon and a lofty blue sky with red flags of huge size grandiosely fluttering in the wind.

When they are not grand and epic, the posters contain strong utopian, fantasmatic and dreamy elements, as with the stunningly beautiful 1972 "The Commune's Fish Pond" by Dong Zhengyi.[54] It is only a fish pond with fish that is shown, and yet the depiction evokes strong notes of the surreal and the dreamy. It seems that there was an elevating if not a transcendental dimension to the way the class struggle was experienced by the participants during the Cultural Revolution. Does this not remind one of the depiction of the Soviet socialist experience as we find in the works of, say, Andrei Platonov? Here again we see strong parallels with the sequence of the October Revolution.

I have earlier engaged with this dimension in the writings of Platonov.[55] This needs a long and sustained engagement which cannot be done now. Suffice it to mention here that for Platonov the revolutionary "bonfire of the class struggle" undergoes a mythic transformation into the "fire of Inferno." The elemental and the mythic crisscrosses with the political and the economic; the sky merges with the earth, as when Platonov compares a flock of birds flying in the sky to a group of men digging in the earth. The work of digging the earth might be the work of building a canal or laying railways tracks as part of the Collectivisation drive and industrialization—now this can be referred to in the same breath as the poetic imagery of birds flying in the sky!

We cannot really delve further into Mao's thoughts. But we

[53] Posted at https://chineseposters.net/posters/e15-125.
[54] In Richard King, ed., *Art in Turmoil: Chinese Cultural Revolution 1966-76*, UBC Press, Vancouver, 2010, before p. 151.
[55] See footnote 38.

clearly see that Maoist thought is not just some politics suitable for a bygone era—the practice of the Cultural Revolution must be understood in all its intensity and, considering how much it opened up the notion of social contradiction in its many-sided richness, we can see how extremely futuristic it is. A lot of the complexity we see around the postisms and the woke culture can be seen to be have been pre-figured by the Cultural Revolution.

At one level, the Cultural Revolution appears to be all about emphasising the "superstructural" elements in the revolutionary process, but on the other, it can be seen as radicalising Marx's critique of political economy, in particular, a critical continuation of the most nuanced understanding of the communist project as developed by Marx in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* and, of course, *Capital.* It is not about eulogising or fetishising the Cultural Revolution, converting it into another dogma in the making, but just opening up to view the great possibilities that lay in this massive revolutionary upsurge.

To be able to address the challenges of politics today, Mao and Maoist politics must be understood properly and creatively. Reducing it to mechanical formulae would amount to the abandonment of a rich legacy of radical, futuristic thinking.



Preface

The essays in this collection reflect my efforts to grapple with some ideological issues posed by developments in the field of theory as well as contemporary political practice. Well before being "despatched" for my enforced "sabbatical," I had attempted something in this direction through articles written for various journals. Some of those ideas have been further worked on here, hopefully amplifying them.

A constant theme running through all of these essays is that of deepening the critique of mechanical thinking. In this process, I have also tried to engage with views critical of Marxism. The guidance has been the thinking that, both in its emergence and advance, Marxism has drawn from its critical engagement with diverse streams of thought and subsequent synthesis. Its future depends, very much, on retaining and employing this quality in close relation to the practice of "changing the world." It remains for the reader to judge how far I have succeeded.

The lead essay directly takes up one such stream of thought, something I have chosen to characterise as "postisms." This includes the numerous variants and off-shoots of post-modernist thought. Beyond that, there is also the thinking that is influenced by it, though formally outside its theoretical paradigm. The justification for this broad categorisation is a common strand connecting them, their stubborn refusal to grasp anything in its totality.

All of these essays were written while in prison, except the last three. I thought it appropriate to include them since they would help in understanding the theoretical background. An interview done by KP Sethunath, a noted journalist of Keralam, has been added as an appendix. The essays written in prison benefited from the careful reading done by comrades Varavara Rao and Vernon Gonzalves. Some stylistic changes have since been made and explanatory notes and references added. The 'jail language' has, however, been left as is, eliptical. Most of the essays were further improved, drawing on the insightful suggestions made by J. Mouwafad Paul. The scholarly introduction contributed by Dr. Saroj Giri helps place them in a broader context. I thank both of them. Thanks are also due to all the comrades and friends who have assisted in preparing the manuscript for the printers and the Foreign Languages Press (Paris) which has contributed its editorial and publishing skills. A South Asian edition is being brought out simultaneously by Kanal Publishing Centre.

November 2020 *Murali (Ajith)*

On Postisms' Concepts and Methods

The following critique on some of the concepts and methods seen in postcolonial theory and postmodernism is mostly informed by samples of their applications as seen in articles published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*. The arguments made in these articles have serious implications for the theory and practice of radical change. They need to be challenged. Moreover, they are guided by some prominent and common methodological approaches of "postist" thinking. These can and must be critiqued as such, separate from specific concepts.

Let me start off with a quotation, "…non European societies have their own internal dynamics and cannot be reduced to the European idea of history. This new reading of Marxism also states that there is no uni-linear teleological history imitating an evolutionist model, that is, history moving from the alleged 'low' to 'high' societies. This new model of history thus shows that tribal societies are not a 'lower' type of society and that a 'direct revolution' is possible for them without going through capitalism."[1] What we see here is an often repeated criticism made against Marxist historiography. It has its variations. Some charge everyone, including Marx. Others excuse him. However, facts present a more complex picture.

The rejection of extrapolated West European history as a universal model goes back all the way to Marx—and Lenin. The former's views on this matter, seen in his letters to Russian communists have been noticed and commented upon.[2] The latter's equally explicit

[1] "History from Below," Murzban Jal, *EPW*, Vol. 52, No. 11, p. 28.
[2] The "new reading" being proposed claims to be a take-off from this.

separation from reductionist "universal modelling," as seen in his "What the Friends of the People Are…" has however received scant attention.[3] The version of historical materialism that later came to be widely upheld departed from these views. What may be described as the "five stage" theory of historical development became dominant. Marxist historiography was often reduced to a matter of identifying similarities in a given society shared with this or that historical stage pre-given by this scheme and characterising it as a "form" of that stage. There were exceptions. Jose Carlos Mariategui, the founder of the Communist Party of Peru and D. D. Kosambi the historian in India are two brilliant examples.

Rather than confirming the arguments of the "new reading" as seen in the quote given earlier, their work demolishes it. Every social formation certainly has its own internal dynamics and features. Yet, there is also something that can be abstracted from all these particularities and deemed as universal. Marxism understands them as aspects of the laws of history. This is challenged by some who declare such views to be a distortion of Marxism. They attribute them to Engels. According to them Marx has never ever used the term "laws of history." Whatever may be the case, it is still an undeniable fact that he did advance a conceptual frame, emphasising certain factors as common for all social formations and historical transformation. The famous passage from "Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy" summarised his understanding of the dynamics of historical transformation. Earlier, the "German Ideology" had

[3] "No Marxist has ever argued anywhere that there 'must be' capitalism in Russia 'because' there was capitalism in the West, and so on. No Marxist has ever regarded Marx's theory as some universally compulsory philosophical scheme of history, as anything more than an explanation of a particular social-economic formation." VI Lenin, "Let us now see how Mr. Mikhailovsky fights…" from *What the "Friends of the People" Are and How They Fight the Social-Democrats*. https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1894/friends/03.htm#v01zz99h-191-GUESS. It may be argued that Lenin did indeed speak of the "slavery, feudalism, capitalism" trajectory in his speech "The State" and that the basis for this can be seen in Marx and Engels themselves (*German Ideology*). While that is true, it is also clear that in both of these instances their statements were qualified. That is, they were made in reference to specific regions, not as some "universally compulsory philosophical scheme of history."

already identified universal factors such as productive forces and relation of production forming the structure of every social formation. The role played by the working out of their dialectics in historical transformation was also noted. Mariategui and Kosambi could shed light on the unique features of the societies they lived in precisely because they took guidance from such "universals."

What is purported to be a "new reading" is more a "postist" version of Marxism. Similar to other postist thinking it too avoids material reality and argues that there is no question of historical movement from "lower" to "higher." Yes, this is indeed a crucial arena of contest with capitalism's reading of history, which places itself at the pinnacle of social progress. But not just capitalism; every oppressive order has pictured itself—its culture, economic system and socio-political relations—as superior to all others. This has been even more explicit in their treatment of tribal societies. Caste-feudal characterisation of ethnic communities as "kaadar," "junglee," etc. (forest people) and the use of these terms as demeaning epithets is an immediate experience for us. The allocation of "higher" or "lower" positions flowing from such thinking is no doubt reprehensible. Yet, it would be wrong to dismiss this positioning as a mere creation of some teleological vision or of social hubris. The judgmental valuation seen here, no matter how objectionable, has a material basis. It goes beyond the narrow class (or caste) interests of a ruling order. When this is denied, the rejection of teleological reading ends up negating the very fact of historical or social development.

In terms of division of labour, technology and productivity, tribal societies were vastly surpassed by the exploitative societies that subsequently emerged. That is undeniable fact. It had its implications in the development of the ideological realm, which in turn influenced the productive capabilities of those societies. Will it make any difference if, instead of "lower" and "higher," we use the terms "simple/complex" or "advanced/backward?" Well, if we remain materialist, then we will inevitably have to accept that the complex and advanced is higher than the simple and backward—at the min-

imum in its material relations. That does not in the least mean that the higher can be valorised as the ideal. Nor does it exclude a critical examination of its values and relations with reference to those of the lower. This is precisely the implicit suggestion of the Marxist concept of primitive communism. Though primitive, it sustained communal relations and values, since there was no exploitative class. From the standpoint of the oppressed, that is something to be cherished and learned from. It was incomparably higher when compared to the base selfishness seen in exploitative societies.

Marx's intervention in the debate on the prospects of the Russian village communities was informed by this understanding. These communities still retained much of communal living and production. The question was whether, given those features, they could directly pass on to communism. Marx opined that they could, without passing through a capitalist interregnum. Can this be cited in favour of the objection to our distinguishing between" higher" and "lower" forms of societies? No. Something very important would be missed in that reading. Marx's endorsement of a direct passage to communism was predicated on the growing presence of a proletariat in Russia. The leadership of this class, *produced by capitalism,* was seen as a necessary condition. Its implication was the ideological guidance of this class. This could function as a channel to convey all the positive gains of capitalist modernity. In that process, the feudal ambiance these communities were steeped in would be upset and steadily diminished.

One must not forget that a good amount of backwardness, such as religious obscurantism and patriarchy were as much integral constituents of Russian village communities, as were their communal features. Obviously, Marx would not have intended that they too were to be carried along with their "direct revolution" to communism. This "direct passage" would also necessarily be an internal revolution. What would eventually be a part of the new communist society would be a synthesising of the village communities' communal values and relations. Such synthesis would only be possible

from the standpoint of the new society. Whichever way one wished to describe it, it would in fact have been higher, advanced, and superior, to those village communities.

Marx could grasp the new possibilities inherent in the Russian situation without getting trapped in schemata precisely because he was consistently materialist in his approach. He would thus identify the potential of Russian village communities in the context of the emergence of world capitalism and the growth of the proletariat in Russia. To make a consistent rupture from the "universal modelling of history" that comes from "European ideas of history," we too must stick to materialism. We must start by recognising the material grounding of these concepts in the actual historical trajectory of West Europe, in the growth of capitalism and its world transformational impact.

Two interrelated yet distinct intellectual streams have gone into the conceiving of a "universal modelling of history." Drawing on the Enlightenment and giving it shape, West European intellectuals conceptualised their own history as the inevitable path to be followed by all countries. The capitalism they were part of was lauded as the ideal society. This was the primary defining stream. The other one was the internalisation of this thinking by Third World intellectuals.

West European universalising theory was not the first to emerge in the world. The Third World too has had its fair share in this. What distinguished the former was its reach, encompassing the whole world. The spread of capitalism in that region and the colonisation of almost all of the remaining world made this possible. The advanced capabilities of the capitalism that took shape in West Europe, compared to all other existing social systems, were an enabling factor. This was by no means uni-linear or predetermined. There was nothing guaranteeing that what started with the Renaissance would necessarily arrive at the Industrial Revolution. A number of incidental events went into its eventual emergence. But once it got consolidated, its superiority was beyond question. Control

over most of the world's territory and resources enabled and fuelled capitalism's growth.

Like in all other spheres, colonialism had grave ramifications for the intellectual one too. Intellectual traditions in the colonies suffered a mortal blow. Their organic development through contests and synthesis between different schools of thought, all within a broad frame of reference specific to each wider region, was abruptly blocked. Even when one or the other school was valorised by Western intellectuals, as for example *Advaida* in South Asia, it was treated as something long dead. Its continuing presence in philosophical and theological debates was ignored. It was denied contemporaneity. The whole frame of reference shaping and indicating topics and issues of intellectual activity in that region was displaced by that of the colonisers, by the West European thought frame.

Even the most recent Western intellectual easily summons a Plato or Aristotle as living, relevant, reference. The Western ancients still retain this contemporaneity precisely because of an unbroken chain of thought process. In actual history, Greek philosophy re-arrived in Europe through Arab philosophical schools.[4] But more than this detour, what mattered was the continuity in thought. For the South Asians, Charvaka, Kanada, Kapila or Nagarjuna, even the relatively recent Ramanuja or Madhva, are far removed from their contemporary intellectual concerns. At most, they enter into debate *about* those stalwarts. Their concepts, methods and arguments do not become part of our present debates, as guidance or reference. The frames of thought popularised by those schools are, for us, purely *objects* of study.

"Postcolonial theory" would have us believe that the intellectual malaise of "…simply pick(ing) the latest theory off the shelf and 'apply'(ing) it in our context, notwithstanding its provincial European origin…" is because "…we so believe that 'theory' is by definition universal."[5] No. It is because we have internalised the Euro-

[4] Martin Bernal's "Black Athena" and Samir Amin's "Eurocentrism" uncover the layers obfuscating the "Eastern" associations of "Western" thought.

[5] "The Work of Theory-Thinking Across Traditions," Prathama Banerjee et. al, *EPW*, Vol 51, No. 37, p. 42.

pean thought frame and made it ours; not voluntarily, but by violent colonial imposition. This is the main reason for our finding it "… next to impossible to approach… (pre-colonial thinkers)… from our modern locations, even though we find it perfectly legitimate to read archaic… Plato and Aristotle."[6]

Stubbornly sticking to its exclusion of materiality, postcolonial theory argues that the factors underlying the continuity seen in Western philosophical thought resides within that tradition itself. It thus presents this continuity as an outcome of a "European tradition," seen from Kant onward that conceived theory to be "…immune to historicisation…" "This resistance to historicisation made possible the setting up of a seamless contemporaneity between European thinkers…from Plato to Marx to Deluze…"[7] The superficiality of this argument can be readily seen if put in a broader context. Claims about "standing above historicisation" were by no means unique to Western thought. Advaida, for example, asserts its eternalness and traces its roots to the Vedas. So why did this South Asian school fail, like others from this region, in remaining contemporary? Postcolonial theories' narrow frame emerging from its "West-fixation" can never raise or address such questions. Moreover, it forces this theory to ignore counter trends that came up in the West itself, such as the theoretical work of Marx and Engels who insisted on historicisation. Moreover, it would be hard put to explain why they could still continue to draw on Western philosophical thought from the ancients onward in their intellectual work—despite this insistence.

Postcolonialism's avoidance of material factors is further compounded by its "postist" take on "theory." It is stated, "Theory is *often understood* as thought in abstraction."[8] Later, it does acknowledge that abstraction is seen in South Asian thought as well. It even goes on to speak of the "generalisation" present in any theory. The sense sought to be conveyed is that its opposition is to the notion of abstraction as normative, as universality of thought, or as the highest

[6] Ibid., p. 46.
[7] Ibid., p. 46.
[8] Ibid., p. 43; emphasis added.

mode of thinking. All of these are seen as characteristic to Western thought. Does this distinction make any difference? An abstraction drawn from concrete relations or processes may be deemed normative. But that cannot be a reason to deny the abstraction necessary for any theorisation or the universality contained in abstraction. This is not a matter of someone's "understanding." They are intrinsic to the thought process. Remove abstraction and you will end up removing theory itself.

Besides, universality is not engendered by "claims" of its trans-historical relevance. That quality is something attributed to it. The source and location of such attribution lies outside universality. By its very nature any universality is relative. That is so because it is conditioned by the particularities it expresses. It resides in those particularities with all their specificities.[9] Therefore, the attribute of being "trans-historical" can be given to a universality only by forcibly separating it from the concrete relations it was abstracted from. Idealism and metaphysics tear apart the dialectical relation of the universal and the particular. They then go on to impose a rigid hierarchy with the universal as supreme. They do not grasp the idea about a material object as a thought product arrived at through abstraction from that material reality. Instead the object is declared to be a manifestation of the "idea," or as being defined, determined, by the "idea." Enlightenment thoughts' normative models were grounded in such inversions.

Identifying the idealist, metaphysical thinking that has given rise to the manufacture of universal models from which the real is supposedly derived, helps in rescuing its critique from the bounds of an East-West dichotomy. These aberrations were not (and are not) purely Western or solely products of the Enlightenment. Idealism of the East was no less harmful. *Advaida's* conception of the sensuous universe as a projection of *nirgunabrahma,* filtered through the veil of *maya,* Samkhya's denial of emergent qualities and reduction

[9] Lenin's "On the Question of Dialectics" ("Philosophical Notebooks," *Collected Works*, Volume 38) and Mao Zedong's *On Contradiction* give excellent elabourations on the dialectic of the universal and the particular.

of every quality to something potentially pre-contained in *Prakriti*, Brahmanism's insistence that all diversities are merely manifestations of a single unity—these are some examples from South Asia.

Coming to the present, why does our "dependent, derivative" relationship to Western theory continue in the "postcolonial?" Is it merely an intellectual hangover from our colonial past? To answer these questions we need to get rid of the very paradigm of a "post-coloniality." No doubt, one sees variety among postcolonial thinkers on this matter. Some among them even accept the need to factor in the continuing role of imperialism. Yet, despite such gestures, this school of thought is basically predicated on the assumption that the erstwhile colonies are now independent. Even if continuing ties of dependence are acknowledged, they are considered secondary. The postcolonial paradigm is thus, in essence, the denial of the neo-colonial, i.e. the continuing domination and exploitation of ex-colonies by imperialism through indirect means.

Under neo-colonialism, the erstwhile colonies have gained formal independence. In fact, neo-colonialism thrives on the semblance of independence. Exploitative, dominating relations which were explicit under colonialism are now filtered, inverted, through the false consciousness of independence. For the neo-colonial mind, its practice of uncritically taking up the latest "Western" intellectual product and interpreting its own surroundings through the new tools or concepts it offers, is never a matter of tailing the foreign. It is seen as an organic outgrowth of one's own intellectual tradition. And that is the fact. The transition from colonial to neo-colonial conditions did not call for any rupture in thought tradition. Rather, the theories and methods of the erstwhile colonisers continued to be appreciated as most valid and relevant. They are now applied in the firm belief that one is contributing to the development of a thinking that is now considered to be born of and serving an independent country. The case of "development" is illustrative. Economic landscapes shaped by colonialism are left basically untouched, even while new entry points for the penetration of imperialist finance capital

are opened up. What was damned as examples of imperialist domination are now welcomed as necessary for the development and the building of a strong nation.[10]

Postcolonial theory willingly accepts the semblance of independence offered by neo-colonialism. Not surprisingly, it dismisses the Marxist understanding on the continuing role of capital—now finance capital—in shaping the world as a "buying into this totalising theoretical category [i.e. Universal history] and this narrative of the relentlessly universalising drive of capital."[11]

Why is it that, unlike other societies in the past, the West has been able to posit "…its particular history as the driver of global history…?"[12] How did this particular "universal history" succeed in imposing itself as hegemonic theory over the whole world? Denied material reasoning by postism, we are forced to be satisfied with some mysterious attribute of the capitalist West's "universal history," something summoned up through the power of its thought tradition. Caught up in this dead end, postcolonial theory thus blocks the deepening of its own critique of capitalism's universalising claims.

The inner tendency of capital to appropriate more and more surplus value drives it to continuously seek out new venues and territories and make them amenable to its specific form of surplus extraction. This underlies capitalism's tendency to refashion the world in its image. The universalising tendency of capitalism, its ability to impose its own, particular, history as universal, is grounded in this material dynamics. Global networks of trade have existed since antiquity. Colonial empires too were not unique to capitalism. Yet, the transformative role of this social system stands unmatched in its breadth and depth.

Marxism took note of this distinction. The limits imposed on capitalism's world transformative role by the very same thirst for surplus were not, however, sufficiently worked out. That can be seen in Marx's writings. For example, in his "On British Rule in India,"

[10] I have outlined this inversion in "The Working of the Neo-colonial Mind.", see p. 108 of this collection.
[11] "The work of theory…," Op. Cit., p. 45.
[12] Ibid., p. 45.

the expectation was of a more or less rapid capitalist transformation of the colonies. As we know, that was not what actually transpired.[13] British colonialism implanted capitalist relations and brought about transformations in caste–feudalism. But it did not eliminate it. Capitalism's transition to imperialism, its larger investments and the building up of several industries did not bring about any basic change in this pattern. Colonialism continued to be a restraint on the development of local capitalism. Caste-feudalism continued in its transformed forms. Caste continued to have a prominent place, both in the old and "modern" sectors of the economy. Taking all of this into consideration, the 3rd International fleshed out, so to say, Marxism's skeletal assumptions on the prospects for growth of capitalism in the colonies. It pointed out how colonialism restricts the growth of local capitalism, how it makes feudalism its social base, and how it gives rise to severe disarticulation in the economies of the colonies.

Building on this, in the light of the experience of making revolution in an oppressed country, Mao Zedong added clarity and precision. He qualified the capitalism engendered by imperialism in China as bureaucrat capitalism. Attention was drawn to the direct role of the state in its emergence and existence. The intertwining of bureaucrat capitalism with feudalism and its compradorism were noted. Mao Zedong differentiated the class representing this capitalism, the comprador-bureaucrat bourgeoisie, from the national bourgeoisie representing native capital. The concept of bureaucrat capitalism was further refined by the Peruvian Maoist, Abimael Guzman (Gonzalo). He noted how bureaucrat capitalism serves both imperialism and feudalism, as well as the traditional type of rich peasants.

These characteristics of bureaucrat capitalism provide the key to understand modernity under colonial conditions. Many have noted the persisting presence of pre-capitalist relations and values in the colonies, along with many features of capitalist modernity. This condition has been described as "colonial modernity," distinguishing it

[13] See the essay "Re-reading Marx on British India" on p. 178 of this collection.

from that seen in capitalist countries. The dominant interpretation of this condition as "incomplete modernisation" however misses the essence of the matter. Rather than being incomplete, what happened was the regeneration, resurrection, of various features of the old, the traditional, by bureaucrat capitalism; even while it continuously transformed it and ushered in the new. Transformation through bureaucrat capitalism will never be complete. This is the essential characteristic of colonial modernity. So long as the country continues to be under imperialist oppression and bureaucrat capitalism remains operative, this dialectic of transformation/resurrection will persist. Hence we see it under neo-colonialism as well.

The concept of colonial modernity is presently being challenged by arguments about what is termed as "multiple modernities." This is posed as a rejection of Western hegemonic ideas of a universal model of modernity. It is pointed out that the dominant classical theories of modernisation tend to ignore the huge variations within the West itself, not to speak of the non-West. What this sweeping critique ends up with is the elimination of the basic distinction between the West (read capitalist countries) and the non-West (read oppressed countries). In the former, with all its diversities, modernisation was an organic part of the transition to capitalism. In the latter, it was an outgrowth of the forced transformation of pre-capitalist societies under colonial, semi-colonial conditions; an outcome of the engendering and development of bureaucrat capitalism

Once this basic distinction is left out, one loses sight of the real dynamics seen in the accommodation of both the old and new in the colonies. The replacement offered in its stead is the atrociously preposterous assertion that, "…non-West societies *have adopted* some components of modernity within their local context *without giving up* all of their own specific elements of cultural traditions," "…not all aspects of the model of modernity *were accepted* by these non-Western societies."[14]

This is preposterous because it assumes that these countries

[14] "Female Education," Ambika Kohli, *EPW*, Vol 52, No. 8, p. 62; emphasis added.

had the freedom to pick and choose the elements of modernity they desired. It is atrocious in that it conceals the violent suppression and imposition suffered by those countries under colonialism. Going by this argument one would in fact have to conclude that there was (and is) no such thing as imperialist oppression. Rather than assisting in untangling the complex, contradictory features of colonial modernity, the thesis of "multiple modernities" simply tries to wish away this task. Instead, we are given a blanket assertion, "… the Indian modernity is distinctively modern even though it appears to be greatly influenced by traditional cultural values and historical experiences."[15]

The unique features of any social formation will persist, even when it is overcome and shaped by a colonising social system. The process of subjugation and remoulding won't be entirely determined by the colonisers. Along with the persistence of previously existing values and relations, the resistance of various sections of the subjugated also will have an active part, even if secondary, in the whole process. Therefore, the contours and features of colonial existence will differ from country to country, and even among different nationalities or regions within them. Yet, despite all this uniqueness, all colonial and semi-colonial countries commonly exhibited certain features; even if they were expressed differently. They continue to do so under neo-colonialism. This justifies the employment of the broad concept "colonial modernity." It cannot be replaced by constructs like "Indian modernity," "Chinese modernity," etc.

The thesis of Indian modernity grudgingly admits that "…it appears to be greatly influenced by traditional cultural values." Is this merely a matter of appearance? The apparent admission of the traditional seen here is, actually, the elimination of its place as something basic, essential, to the modernity that took form under colonialism. It is a denial of persisting semi-feudalism. The insistence of this thesis on "particularising" thus ends up concealing prominent, defining particularities.

Those adamant on making an East-West opposition the most

[15] Ibid., p. 63.

important dividing line, as seen in these instances of critiquing the "universalisation" done by the West, end up delivering an opposite extreme. In essence, if not explicitly, an equally idealist "universalising" East is posited by them. In this case, "universalisation" is actualised by avoiding any critical examination of "Eastern" conditions and thought constructs. All-embracing concepts, claims on being the sole, overarching philosophy, the "othering" of peoples and races and so on seen in the East, just as much as in the West, are simply ignored. Avoiding stark instances of absolute monism (Advaida) and dualism (Samkhya), the concepts of pluralism seen in some schools of thought (Bauddha, Jaina, Dao) are presented as something unique to all Eastern thinking. Nothing could be further from truth.

Advaida, for example, swallows up all particularities, including that of its core concept *nirgunabrahma,* by defining it to be undefinable. Realisation of this and, thereby, the identity of one's self with it, is considered supreme knowledge. Pure contemplation, untainted by practice, not even that of worship, is claimed to be the true path to this realisation. Evidently, the exaltation of the pursuit of "… knowledge solely for its own sake…," uncontaminated by practical interests, was by no means a monopoly of classical Greek philosophia, as postcolonial theorists would have it.[16] All absolutist schools of idealism share in this, regardless of their geographical location.

This is not to deny concerns and paradigms unique to different traditions. For example, the Nastika-Astika divide was considered basic in South Asia. That division broadly indicated those schools which accepted the authority of the Vedas and Smritis (Astika) and those that didn't (Nastika). The implications this unique division had in the articulation and contest over basic issues of philosophy in South Asia, as compared to that seen in the West (or elsewhere), certainly demands notice and deep probing. Along with that we must also keep in mind that this categorisation did not make the distinction between mind and matter, and their consideration as primary or secondary, irrelevant. The emphatically materialist Charvaka, Lokayata schools and the idealist Jaina, Buddhist schools were no

[16] "The Work of Theory…," Op. Cit., p. 43.

less adamant in their mutual contestations, despite all of them being Nastika. Particularities notwithstanding, the basic questions posed by human existence and the sensuous universe are common to all, no matter where they are located.

Considering one's own thought as supreme, as the one that orders and informs all other thoughts, was prominent among the idealist schools of South Asia. Postcolonial theorists' fascination with particularisation steers them away from such commonly seen characteristics. Instead, they seek to bolster the East–West opposition in the form they conceive by "proving" that there was nothing similar to the word "philosophy" in the Southern tradition. The proof is, there was a "…problem in finding terms in the Sanskrit lexicon that could translate as philosophy."[17] What are we to make out of this formalism that demands of us to apply the terminology of the West as the criteria for determining the nature of the thought processes over here? Rather than matching terms, what matters is something else. Was there any stream in the South Asian thought tradition similar to the thinking in Western traditions that conceived of itself as a total system, containing the source and explanation of all phenomena, mental and material? The answer is an emphatic yes.

Marxism criticised and demolished the thinking dominant in Europe that considered philosophy to be an overarching, supreme, system of thought. The "classical philosophy" referred to in Engels' "Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical Philosophy" precisely meant such thinking. Conceiving of philosophy as something standing above all other disciplines of thought was not just a construct of aberrant thought. It also drew on the primitiveness of the sciences, including the science of thought. Developments in all these fields made such philosophy redundant, meaningless. Marxism's arguments on the demise of "last word philosophies" were based on these material developments as well.

Unlike postcolonial critiques that end up in a narrow vision guided by locational classifications, Marxism enables us to situate various schools of thought in their historical context. It also allows

[17] Ibid., P 43

us to appreciate the contribution they have made to human knowledge, regardless of where they took form and what their persuasions were. This is aided in no small measure by its recognition of the distinct sphere of theory and the dynamics unique to it, through its rich, nuanced understanding of the theory-practice dialectics of praxis.

Defining theory as an "efficacy" that allows us to engage with an ongoing process, the variety of postcolonial theory examined here reduces it to a "…particular mode of working with the world rather than abstracting from it." The understanding of theoretical work as an abstraction from a material process, as a "…momentary suspension of it so as to make time or space for thought" is denied.[18] This logic leads it to refuse theory any specific plan of action unique to it. Theory gets re-imagined as practice. Credit is then claimed for getting out of the supposed trap of a theory-practice binary.

True, if the work of theory is assumed to be completed once an abstraction is made, it would be sterile. But that observation cannot be taken to the absurd extreme of denying the abstraction necessary for any theorisation or the inevitable "momentary suspension" (freezing, as Lenin puts it) of a process, seen in any abstraction from it. Instead of identifying and critiquing the absolutist conception and employment of abstraction made by idealism and mechanical materialism, postcolonialism treats abstraction itself as problematic. The idealist construct of the abstract and concrete as absolutes is taken to be the only mode of expressing their relation. Thereby, the grounding of the abstract in the concrete, which permits it to capture the essence of the latter, their dialectics, is denied.

For all that, the postcolonial theorist still cannot avoid theory, the abstraction it contains and the freezing this entails. They are then uneasily "re-entered." Theory, it is said, becomes a particular way of practice. It moves from the empirical to conceptualisation and back with "…thought making a place by pausing and tarrying."[19] Theory is presented as a to-and-fro motion. This emerges from the thesis of

[18] Ibid., p. 41.
[19] Ibid., p. 46.

"theory as practice." It is presented as a break from theory conceived as a "…domain unto itself of thought… (not practice)."[20] Blurring the distinction between both of them, this postcolonialist argument ends up with some astonishing results.

Theory is not a "domain unto itself." True. But it definitely is a domain of thought. Its capacity to seek out interconnections, contradictions within and among phenomena, to extrapolate across disciplines and conceive of the totally new (unrelated to immediate sensuous reality), is given precisely by the qualities of thought. When this is denied and theory is re-imagined as practice, the actual outcome turns out to be quite the opposite. The transformative potential of a theory is declared to lie "…not in its successful application to… the domain of practice but in its ability to change our sense of the world."[21] Since theory is said to be differently named practice, there should presumably be no need for anything beyond it to verify whether the "new sense of the world" it lays claim to actually corresponds to the real world. Theory thus becomes self-attesting. Though named as a type of practice, it ends up as "pure" thought, complete in itself.

One may profitably compare this idealism delivered by postcolonial "levelling" with the rich theory-practice dialectics elabourated by Mao Zedong in his work *On Practice*. He elucidates the movement from perceptual knowledge of the empirical to conceptual knowledge and then back to its verification in practice, in a never-ending spiral of knowledge. [22]

[20] Ibid., p. 46.
[21] Ibid., p. 44.
[22] "...the first step in the process of cognition is contact with the objects of the external world; this belongs to the stage of perception. The second step is to synthesise the data of perception by arranging and reconstructing them; this belongs to the stage of conception, judgement and inference… Rational knowledge depends upon perceptual knowledge and perceptual knowledge remains to be developed into rational knowledge—this is the dialectical-materialist theory of knowledge… But the movement of knowledge does not end here. Knowledge begins with practice, and theoretical knowledge is acquired through practice and must then return to practice… The problem of whether theory corresponds to objective reality is not, and cannot be, completely solved in the movement of knowledge from the perceptual to the rational… The only way to solve this problem completely is to redirect rational knowl-

Claiming to offer a different vision of theorisation, this postist view states, "…(W)e need to creatively construct a place of theorising which admits to historicity while also being emancipated from it." Further, "…(W)e must begin our theoretical enterprise by determining the degree and quality of abstraction we seek to achieve from our own historical context and from the empirical materials we work with."[23] How is this determination to be made? What should be its criteria? Since materialism is given no place in its schemes, postcolonial theorising inevitably leads to arbitrary choices. The project of critiquing claims about "universal histories" will remain unfulfilled since the proposed alternative will be yet another arbitrarily determined plane of theorising.

Any history can only be that of a particular society, in a particular material context (geography, economy, etc.), at a particular juncture of time and in particular relations to other groups of peoples (societies). It will be determined, shaped, by all of them. The derivation of theory from particularised history by synthesising its essential features, calls for abstractions from its concreteness. Through this we generalise and derive laws. Yet, even if this done with a high degree of abstraction, they will still retain elements of the particularities they were abstracted from. They will always be accompanied by the infirmity of being constructed from abstractions that are inevitably marked by a "freezing of reality." Where the grasp and application of theory is tempered with this awareness it serves as a guide to practice. Otherwise it misguides it. This is the thrust of Marxism's insistence on "creative application." It starts, not from theory conceived as some "universal model," but from the "concrete analysis of concrete conditions." Here, theory is guidance. Not an "idea" to be worked towards and confirmed by analysis and practice. All the leaps in theory and radical practice achieved by Marxism have come through such creative application. This Marxist proposition is entirely grounded in the materialist understanding of the

edge to social practice, apply theory to practice and see whether it can achieve the objectives one has in mind." https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_16.htm

[23] Ibid., p. 45.

general and particular, of the abstract and concrete. There is nothing arbitrary about it.

The "mode of production" debate of the 1970s and 80s, conducted through the pages of the *Economic and Political Weekly*, is instructive of what happens when this Marxist approach is missed. Despite offering many new insights, its outcome was inconclusive. But it would be a crude vulgarisation to state that the debate was about determining whether the economy was capitalist or not.[24] Rather than seeking such a simplistic yes or no, it was focused on the nature of changes taking place in the Indian economy (particularly in agriculture), its direction and emergent production relations. These certainly were appropriate topics for a debate on the mode of production. Comparisons with the transitions from feudalism to capitalism in Europe and drawing lessons from the famous debate over it also weren't out of place. The main weakness of the debate was its failure to situate its topics within the overriding context of colonialism and continuing neo-colonialism. That was the defining determinant, and it remains so. Instead of giving it due weight, it was treated as one among many other factors. Postcolonial theorisation has a different assessment. In its view, relying on the European transition debate was the main error since it is irrelevant for "…societies such as ours, with no colonies to fund primitive accumulation."[25] No, not the absence of colonies, but *being* a colony was decisive. The "mode of production" debate did not proceed by examining the particularities of the capitalism that was engendered and developed under colonialism, and later under neo-colonialism. The problem was not the application of Marxism, but the manner in which it was applied.

Postcolonial theorisation's damaging implications are further seen in its rejection of the concept of secularism. The reason given is its Christian and European origins that rule out any possibility of working with it. The concept of "Indian secularism" is said to have emerged from this inability. Should we declare the secularism

[24] Ibid., p. 42.
[25] Ibid., p. 42.

concept to be irrelevant in our context purely because of its particular origins in Europe? Or should we examine whether the issue it addresses are present in our context? If the latter approach, based on the materialist outlook of "seeking truth from facts," is followed the answer will be a clear affirmative. Though not identical to forms and roles seen in West Europe, religion was always an intrinsic part of state functioning in South Asia. It was inseparable from governance. Therefore, secularism, understood as the separation of religion from the state, making religion a personal matter, is equally necessary here.

If this concept is still far from being realised, the problem is not of its "in-applicability." It is that of material, social conditions that make its realisation impossible. It is obstructed by the class, caste, interests of the rulers who resist all attempts to transform these social conditions. So-called "Indian secularism" is, primarily, a construct made up by one section among them to obfuscate this. To argue that it has come from an inability to work with a "foreign" concept furthers this deceit.

The continuing existence of caste-feudalism in a transformed form and the growth of bureaucrat capitalism are the most important internal factors blocking democratisation, and as part of it, secularisation, in our country. Specifically, in the matter of secularism, caste poses a unique problem. No matter what the religion, it is on the whole experienced and practised in South Asia by an individual through the mediation of caste. So long as caste exists, religion can never be made a private matter since the individual has no social existence outside of caste. The separation of religion from the state will remain a formal gesture, because making religion a private affair is the main vehicle, the guarantee, of this separation. The annihilation of caste, the freeing of the individual from the grip of caste, is thus a pre-requisite for secularisation in South Asia. Its importance though will vary from country to country in this region, depending on the continuing weight of the caste system.

Given this relation between the annihilation of caste and secularisation, anti-caste social reformers in this region can be seen

arriving at the idea of secularism, independent of Western thought. Narayana Guru, an outstanding socio-religious reformer of the mid 19th-20th centuries in Thiruvithamkoor (presently in Keralam) is an example. He insisted that there is no basis for differentiating among humans as castes since only individual differences exist among them. While remaining a firm Advaidi, he refused to accord any superior status to Hinduism, vis-à-vis other religions. Instead, he advanced a profoundly secular concept of religion—"whatever may be the religion, what matters is the betterment of the human." He thus demanded that religion should be a personal matter. These views were not a stand-alone affair. They had their roots in the Bhakti tradition, which denied the need for any intermediary between the believer and God.

Why does the postcolonial theorist fail to identify these indigenous roots of secularism? Is it mere coincidence that this theory shares positions similar to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and other Hinduvadi forces that reject secularism, branding it as a Western import? Brahmanism has survived and thrived through its unique method of acquiring hegemonic domination through assimilation. The "other" is accorded space, unlike monotheistic religions. But that space itself is positioned within the Brahmanical hierarchy at a lesser level, as yet another manifestation of its supreme truth. The "other" is thus denied its unique origin and distinct existence. The postcolonial proposal on "thinking across traditions" shares in this in as much as it demands assimilation, not synthesis.

"Thinking across traditions" is seen as an answer to two challenges. One of them is the need to break away from the universalising Western model where theoretical abstraction erases the concrete context from which it emerged. It is believed that the proposed method can generate theory that contains generality without nullifying historical differences. Secondly, there is the matter of the "fossilisation" of our thought traditions, unlike the West. Therefore, postcolonialism seeks to "think through" non-modern traditions of thought to make them part of contemporary thought. It explains,

"...(C)ontemporanising involves… treating diverse intellectual traditions as lived traditions, where style and substance reverberate in the present, structuring the way people live and make sense of the world."[26]

The implication and outcome of this method can be seen in the examples offered. One of them is Rabindranath Tagore's and M. K. Gandhi's notions of Gram Swaraj. These are supposed to reveal an "…earlier political tradition that was not state centric and yet… moving away from traditional village society…" and advancing "…a new form of social life that was aside of both forms of power—that of the state and that of caste."[27]

There are several factual errors in this argument. First of all, there never was any village society in South Asia that was outside the ambit of the state or was not "state centric." The much acclaimed stability of villages, that continued regardless of the identity of the sovereign power, was given by the persistence of the caste system. All the rulers, regardless of their religious allegiances, retained it since it was highly suitable for control and exploitation. It is true that the ties of the villages to the state were not tightly centralised. But that was also true of most medieval societies throughout the world. Though loosely connected to the central state apparatus, whether of an empire or of a small kingdom, the villages were the mainstays of caste-feudal social formations in South Asia, in all senses.

Moreover, neither Tagore nor Gandhi ever conceived of village societies "aside" of caste. All they proposed was the elimination of untouchability, not the annihilation of caste. On the contrary, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar proposed the breakup of existent caste-bound village society and its reorganisation on the basis of equal rights to land. That may perhaps be dismissed by the postcolonial theorist as another example of Western-born solutions. For the oppressed in the villages, it would have made eminent sense, regardless of where it came from.

So what did the "contemporanising," "thinking across tradi-

[26] Ibid., p. 48.
[27] Ibid., p. 50.

tions," claimed to have been done by Gandhi and Tagore, actually carry out? Theirs was no reworking of traditions to meet contemporary needs. Rather, new ideas of self-reliance, social development and so on were harnessed to refurbish the old, the retrogressive. One sees the same in the precept "unity in diversity," presented as the "modern idea of India." This is a direct take from the Brahmanist teaching, "The truth is one, though the sages name it differently." The acceptance of the "many" seen here is simultaneously the denial of distinct identities, origins and trajectories, of everything comprising the diversity. Whether this unity is taken to be the Brahmanist concept of truth, national integration or the "Hindu way of life," it precedes diversity. The diversities are mere manifestations of that unity. The presentation of this precept as the "idea of modern India" is nothing but the employment of the traditional to legitimise a particular reading of the contemporary that privileges the Indian ruling classes.

How then can we bridge the rupture inflicted by colonialism that cut us off from our thought traditions? How can we ensure their live presence in contemporary thought? We must begin by accepting the material basis of the rupture. Three centuries and more of separation cannot simply be dismissed. We cannot simply pick up and advance from where the break took place. What is needed is a meaningful effort to regain our knowledge traditions, to end their status as objects of study and to make them a part of our theoretical exercises. That calls for a critical examination of the core concepts of those traditions and their debates. They will have to be synthesised on the basis of new knowledge. This presents a dilemma. The new knowledge acquired by humankind over this period is overwhelmingly Western in its origins and elabourations. Can we employ them to repair the rupture? Since this break has been concretised in the sphere of philosophy and other ideological forms as the hegemony of Western thought traditions, how can we use them to bridge it?

The resolution lies in applying the tool of synthesis to new knowledge itself, in subjecting Western thought to "one divides into

two." This is what Marxism has carried out all along. It is seen in the work of its founders, and onward through Lenin and Mao, to name its main path-breaking contributors. As Mao puts it succinctly, we must "make the old serve the new, and the foreign serve national needs." This is equally necessary if the proposal made to "…begin by asking how thinking proceeds in… (a)…tradition," instead of "…approaching (that) tradition," in terms of its "substantive concerns…" is to give fruitful results.[28] One can, and must separately study both of them while taking up any specific thought tradition. One must also keep in mind that they are part of a whole. Method ("how thinking proceeds") will always carry the implications of the "substantive concerns" it serves. It cannot simply be taken over.

If, following Mao, we are to "make the old serve the new," some issues need to be resolved. What should we take from the old and whose new should it serve? Whose interests should guide it—of the rulers or the people? This brings us to the matter of the class standpoint from which synthesis should be made, the outlook that should guide it. If it's to serve the people then it has to be done from the standpoint of the proletariat. This combines fierce commitment to the cause of the oppressed and exploited with a thinking that is always open to learning from the advances in knowledge on the basis of a thoroughgoing materialism. No doubt, this will sound awfully old-fashioned, and not just to postcolonial theorists. Yet, the very examples given to justify the proposed method of "contemporanising" testify to its correctness.

Other than those earlier seen, two more examples are given—Ambedkar's contemporanising of Buddhism with rights-based liberalism and Tagore's handling of Upanishadic categories with cosmopolitanism. Ambedkar was not the first to read Buddhism from a liberal democratic gaze. What differentiated him was the concern that illuminated his readings. He was driven by the quest to seek out ideological tools that would aid in the emancipation of an oppressed section of society, the *Dalits*. That is what made his Buddhism different.

[28] Ibid., p. 47.

Ambedkar could not identify the role of caste in relation to feudal production relations, grasping it integrally as caste-feudalism. Nor could he realise how colonial rule reproduced it through growing bureaucrat capitalism. Yet, objectively, the "annihilation of caste" he insisted on would resonate with a radical, democratic restructuring of society. It stood in opposition to the Gandhian venture of limiting the issue to ending untouchablity and caste reforms. This is why Ambedkar's reading of Buddhism and his struggle against the caste system objectively served the cause of the people, despite being guided by liberal democracy. It had the potential to become part of a new democratic stream, one that could break away from bourgeois democracy and pave the way to a society free of exploitation.

The concerns guiding Ambedkar were also seen in his assimilation and application of the modern. He was a firm advocate of parliamentary democracy and its principle of "one citizen, one vote." While many of his contemporaries remained satisfied with a formal support for the parliamentary system, he went on to probe what happens when it is applied in a caste-ridden society. He could thus expose how it would produce the opposite of what was intended. It would go on reproducing what he termed as an "unchanging communal majority." This was the continuous reproduction of *Savarna* domination in the political sphere. In all of these instances we can trace a common thread. Despite adhering to the liberal democratic outlook of the bourgeoisie, his concern for a section of the oppressed and exploited often took him in an opposite direction.

How does Tagore compare with this? He wrote, "Bharathavarsha has endeavoured to tie up diversities in a relationship… limited the conflict between *opposing and competing elements in a society by keeping them separate and at the same time engaged in a common task that brought diverse elements together…* "[29] Was caste society ("keeping them separate and at the same time engaged") dealing with "opposing and competing elements?" Were the castes engaged in a "common task?" Tagore's rendering of caste society glosses over its

[29] Quoted from "Antinomies of Nationalism" in Rabindranath Tagore, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *EPW*, Vol: 51, No.6, pp. 42-43; emphasis added.

oppressive, exploitative, character. Neither was there any space for competition with the dominant, ruling castes, nor did the oppressed castes have any say in the tasks imposed on them. The tying up of diversities in a so-called common task, as described by Tagore, was a rehash of the Brahmanist precept "unity in diversity." It is the direct opposite of cosmopolitanism. By definition, cosmopolitanism would call for diverse peoples and cultures to co-exist, mingling with each other in a give-and-take relation. Tagore was not contemporanising Brahmanist Upanishadic precepts. He was internalising and expounding the Western notion of cosmopolitanism through reformed Brahmanist filters. The Brahmanist precept was being given a modern, presentable, visage.

We see two opposing approaches here. In the first, the past was read employing modern thought categories, guided by concerns of the oppressed. In the second, the modern was read in terms of the past, thus rehabilitating the outmoded. It thus became part of the formative process giving shape to the hegemonic consensus, the legitimacy, of the future ruling classes. Where Ambedkar came to see the danger of a "communal majority," Brahmanist reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy were attracted to the parliamentary system precisely for this reason. They saw in it the possibility of regaining and retaining a "Hindu monopoly" over political power. Postcolonial theorisation's method of "thinking across traditions," in which synthesis has no role, thus brushes over such antagonistic, fundamental, divergences. The key question of the standpoint guiding the thinking is ignored. What remains is either an arbitrary "pick and choose" or an eclectic assimilation.

Examining the common characteristics shared by Brahmanism, liberalism and postcolonial theory, Ajay Gudavarthy makes a perceptive observation—"…all three frames… (belong)… to the same epistemic community." The social and political effects of the three frames operate within the limit of a "politics of accommodation" and of "incremental and addictive change."[30] We have seen how

[30] "Brahmanism, Liberalism and Postcolonial Theory," Ajay Gudavarthy, *EPW*, Vol. 51, No. 24, p. 15.

postcolonial theory abides by assimilation as opposed to synthesis. It indeed operates within a "politics of accommodation." However, to make a comprehensive critique of postcolonial theory we must also acknowledge and factor in a crucial difference it has with Brahmanism and liberalism. Gudavarthy has used the expression "opposition without challenging" to describe the postcolonial approach. But this is not mere opposition. It goes beyond that to raise some critical questions and brings to the fore hitherto ignored facets. That is where it stands apart from Brahmanism and liberalism. Its exposure of the rupture seen in our knowledge traditions as compared to the continuity seen in the West and critiquing of "universal history" are some examples. A critical approach to widely accepted theories and concepts is something it shares with other "postist" theories. This stance of postism generates the oppositional space that makes it attractive to a wide range of people dissatisfied with existing conditions. Postist criticisms however, ultimately collapse in tame endings, far removed from the roar with which they come. Its targets remain undiminished, even if a bit shaken up. Two specific characteristics unique to postism underlie this sorry outcome. They frame its accommodative politics.

Like other streams of postism, postcolonial theory has no place for materiality, the factual basis of the issue under analysis. Thus, the material impact of colonialism in our intellectual life had no role in its discussion on the rupture in our thought traditions. As a result, the resolution is limited to the sphere of thought. The practical task of overcoming material relations that retain our dependent existence and thinking has no place in its schemes.

Another trait it shares with other streams of postism is its refusal to grasp anything in its totality. Postcolonial theories' aversion to "totalising" categories and abstractions is an expression of this. It directly flows from postism's negation of integrative, unifying principles and its insistence on disassembling, deconstructing, unpacking, etc. These methodological tools are useful to the extent they aid in realising the inherent limitations of any abstraction, any

concept. They are of assistance in drawing attention to features and particularities that may have been swamped out by "generalisation." Postist thought, with its negation of "metanarratives," absolutises this unravelling. A narrative, a category, that swallows up all the particularities from which it was abstracted should be made to disgorge them. They should be made visible. This would guard against linear interpretations. In its stead, a nuanced reading, closer to reality would be possible. Yet, the totality generated by all those particularities will still remain. One cannot dissolve the former in the latter. Criticism must acknowledge this. Otherwise, in principle, all conceptual thinking should be impossible, since each of them is a metanarrative in its respective domain.

Any phenomenon will have a host of diverse aspects and relations. Despite that, it qualifies as a distinct phenomenon because of some determining aspect or relation. If the determining element is kept aside, one can, at best, give an elabourate account of the diverse aspects at play. For example, in the case of a social formation, the question of what its multiple features hinge on, and consequently, where one must strike to disrupt and upset the reigning state of affairs, will be left unanswered in a bewildering abundance of details.

Postism claims to be free of bias. All are acknowledged. None are privileged. But that is not the whole story. Postist methodology is not just about "unpacking" or the parading of particularities to the exclusion of totality. It is equally at ease with "packed" concepts when that suits its theoretical constructions. In the sample of postcolonial theorisation we examined, that was seen in its uncritical acceptance of the Brahmanist concept of "unity in diversity." Questions that would "unpack" the concept are studiously avoided. That is, questions about this unity, what it represents, who it serves and so on—questions that would subject it to critical examination—are shunned. The lumping together of all thinking that came from Europe under the generic label of "Western thought" is another example of postism's "convenient" packing.

Postist methods and their conceptual frames apparently hold

out the promise of a richly textured, nuanced comprehension. However, by rendering the "whole" invisible, by obscuring determining elements in a swelter of discursive layers brought about through selective unpacking, it remains ambivalent. This has grave implications. When applied to politics, the opposites get diffused, dividing lines are blurred. We can sample this, for instance, in an attempt made to understand the "politics of hurt sentiments" through Foucouldian "biopolitics." The issue is the fanning up of Hindu vigilantism under the Modi government.

We are first given an account of the concept: "…[T]he sovereign is actually made to depend on a wide array of decentralised "executives…"; "…[O]ne of the central premises of biopolitics is the dispersal of centralised power… the shift from a model of sovereignty to a model of governmentality." And:

> …[The] reason this mechanism can come into play is that the enemies who have to be done away with are not adversaries in the political sense of the term; they are threats, either external or internal, to the population and for the population.[31]

Drawing on this, the conclusion is made:

> …Modi can sustain his statesman-like demeanour and present himself as the neutral and secular protector of the values of the modern state, as well as its citizens only because the task of discriminating between what is considered to be Indian and what is considered to be a foreign threat to the Indianness has been transformed to the population itself, which is not hindered by the restrictions based on… human rights, neutrality and rule of law…[32]

First about the concept. The Foucouldian argument on the dis-

[31] "Harmful Speech and the Politics of Hurt Sentiments," Philipp Sperner, *EPW*, Vol 51, No. 44-45, pages 110, 113.
[32] Ibid., p. 115.

persal of centralised power of a sovereign "made to" depend upon a wide array of decentralised executives is a good example of how postist thought swamps out totality with its extra-large offering of particularities. Under capitalism, the state directly deals with almost all aspects of one's life, public and private, carried out through government functions. In this sense, and to this extent, one can speak of "governmentality." To read a dispersal of state power into this, to conclude that the sovereign has been forced into doing it, is simply ridiculous. There has been no dispersal of state power or its decentralisation. Its administration has been decentralised. Through this the state has actually become even more powerful in protecting and carrying out its centralised role.

Compare this with Gramsci's concept of the hegemonic consensus evolved by a ruling class to legitimise its rule. The Gramscian concept breaks away from linear visions. It allows us to comprehend the multiple mediations and structures through which state power is exercised. The socio-cultural dimensions of power relations actualising state power are revealed. Yet, this is not a denial of the reality of centralised state power. Rather, we are given an all-round, nuanced understanding of it, about its sustenance and reproduction through a wide range of elements. On the contrary, the Foucouldian concept disappears the determining feature of a state, namely the centralised power of a class, serving and protecting its interests. The multiple mediations of the exercise of this power, including through its internalisation by those being ruled over, are taken as independent. They are posed separate from their shaping up by the centralised state. Simultaneously, even while all these layers are being set up, a key element of the argument, "the population," is carefully shielded from being unpacked.

The numerous divisions in a society, their differing interests and, consequently, varying responses to what is deemed as a threat by the ruling class—all of this is swept up under the term "population." The antagonistic relation between a state serving an exploiting class and the people it rules over is vanished. The people, meaning

the oppressed, objectively constitute the enemy of any exploitative state. Hence, if the strictures of biopolitics are strictly followed, the people, as a part of the "population," would be a threat to themselves! Admittedly this is a rather gross caricature. It is nevertheless useful in bringing out how the Foucouldian argument obscures the people's enemy, i.e. the state serving an exploitative ruling class, how it causes passivity and a feeling of helplessness in the midst of a suffocating embrace by an oppressive state power.

The attempt made to explain Hinduvadi vigilantism in terms of this concept elucidates all of these harmful facets. It is argued that Modi is able to sustain an image of neutrality in this matter "only because" the task of differentiating and defending Indianness has been transferred to the "population." The said entity, it is argued, can act as it wishes, enforcing its vision of Indianness without bothering about niceties of fundamental rights or the rule of law. Meanwhile, the government can avoid taking blame and even appear as a defender of rights.

According to the concept of biopolitics, the "transfer to the population," of discriminating between what is and is not Indianness, is an attribute of the shift from sovereignty to governmentality. It should then have predated the Modi government. Then why is that we see an up-tide of Hindu vigilantism *now*, under *this* government? Biopolitics cannot explain this precisely because of its denial of the centralised nature of state power and its mediations through social instruments like political parties, their associated organisations and mass followings. When a political party gets to control the state apparatus, it can employ it to promote its specific program. Once we admit this the "puzzle" falls into place. There has been no transfer of anything to some amorphous "population." Hinduvadi vigilante attacks are carried out by some sections of people, not by a "population at large." They are in fact a tiny minority. These vigilantes are not nameless. They belong to Brahmanist Hindu fascist outfits inspired or organised and led by the Rashtriya Swaymasevak Sangh (RSS). The Modi government too is a tool of this organisa-

tion and is guided by it. The chief ministers in BJP ruled states have been tasked with keeping the police machinery in check so that the vigilantes have a free hand. Simultaneously, Modi, at the Centre, plays the "statesman" role. He tries to dampen public reaction with a stance of neutrality and carefully spaced outbursts against those directly involved in lynchings. The purpose is to prevent a broad mobilisation against Brahmanist Hindu fascism by lulling the opposition with false expectations of government action. From the lynch mobs to the "anguished statesman" all are playing their part in an orchestration of hate, centrally conducted and centrally managed.

Once we get rid of the webs of confusion woven by postism, the seamless project of Brahmanist Hindu fascism operating at different levels and through varied modes stands out in all its hideousness. In place of a shapeless antagonist ("the population") a clear target gets revealed. Besides, the possibility for a deeper and broader assessment of the Hinduvadi up-tide also opens up. While there has been a surge in Hindu vigilantism under the Modi dispensation, the matter cannot be viewed purely in terms of an RSS game plan. Aggressive promotion of Brahmanist values and practices is seen across the whole ruling-class political spectrum. Consider some recent instances. An MLA in the Maharashtra Assembly was suspended for refusing to chant "Bharatmata Ki Jay" (Salutes to Mother India). In his view, considering a country as one's mother didn't accord with his religious beliefs. Quite notably, not just BJP or Shiv Sena legislators, those from the Congress and NCP were also a part of the frenzied move to get him suspended. In fact it was initiated by one from the latter, "secular," grouping. This, despite his willingness to chant "Jai Hind" (Salutes to India). Akhlaq was murdered, accused of keeping beef in his refrigerator, while Akhilesh Yadav of the Samajwadi Party was ruling in UP. Instead of going all out to arrest the perpetrators of this fascist act, his administration was keener on testing the meat to check whether it really was beef—as if that would, at least halfway, justify the murder! Obviously the rise of aggressive Brahmanism goes beyond the RSS. All of these acts are an integral part

of the ongoing ruling-class exercise to recast its hegemonic consensus, replacing hitherto preferred soft, implicit Brahmanism with an aggressive, explicit one. The differences within this are solely about mode and quantum.

To conclude, human thought ceaselessly poses new questions and seeks new answers. It keeps on pushing at the frontiers of knowledge. The need for new concepts and methods suitable for engaging with new fields of inquiry constantly arise. Just as with knowledge there is no last word here. Unlike other systems of thought, Marxism is capable of grasping, of realising, that it has neither exhausted knowledge nor its tools. Both in its emergence and in its further advance, Marxism has drawn strength from its engagement with diverse streams of thought and subsequent synthesis. Its future depends very much on retaining and employing this quality in close relation to the practice of "changing the world." This is the challenge posed before Marxism by postisms. Their unsettling must be welcomed, questions must be embraced, even while the fatal errors of their methods, the superficiality of their concepts and the misguidance inflicted by their conclusions are vigorously negated.



For a Materialist Ethics

I

Given that ethics belongs to the realm of consciousness, of thinking, can there be a materialist ethics? Most idealist schools of thought rule out the very idea. If at all, it is grudgingly admitted, all that is acceded to materialism is an imperfect concept of ethics. Consider the critique of materialist ethics given by Bal Gangadhar Tilak in his *Gita Rahasya*.[1] It is rooted in his definition of materialism as a system of thought that accepts only that which can be sensed by human sensory organs. What is left out in this simplistic definition is materialism's insistence on the objective existence of matter. Matter exists, regardless of our sensing it or not. This is the key difference it has with various shades of idealism. All of them ultimately deny the independent, objective existence of matter.[2]

Tilak's main accusation is that materialism cannot comprehend the mind and all that comes in the mental realm. Relying on this assertion he goes on to claim that a materialist ethics, which tries to incorporate concern for mental satisfaction, must go against its own material premise. This is a baseless argument. Various materialist

[1] *Gita Rahasya* [GR], Bal Gangadhar Tilak, 26th Marathi edition, Pune, 2015. It has been suggested that Tilak cannot be taken as representative of the idealist critique of materialist ethics. That is no doubt true. Writings, far more substantial in their arguments, are surely available. Yet, Tilak remains relevant as an example of the "common sense" idealist criticisms of materialism, which is quite influential. It needs to be answered on its own premises.

[2] Following Lenin, "matter" is taken as a philosophical category derived from diverse material phenomena existing in the universe. It is not something existing as such out there that manifests itself in sensuous objects.

schools do differ on the relation between mind and matter and their nature. But none of them deny the existence of the mind and mental activity. Even the most hedonist among them do not see pleasure purely in materialist terms. They too accept the mental satisfaction accompanying a pleasurable act.

Differing from other schools, the materialism of Marxism goes beyond a recognition of mind along with matter. Mechanical materialism stresses the conditioning of humans by the circumstances in which they live. Criticising this one-sided view, Marxism draws attention to the conscious role of humans in transforming their condition of existence. That too is a part of their material existence. Marx wrote:

> The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forget that circumstances are changed precisely by men and that the educator must himself be educated… The coincidence of changing of circumstances and human activity can only be conceived and rationally understood as revolutionary practice.[3]

Human activity is conscious activity. While consciousness is determined by social existence, it is not an inert product of material conditions. It can contemplate the human conditions of existence, ignite the desire and will to change them and thereby change itself. Marxist materialist dialectics thus makes it capable of advancing a materialist understanding of the mental, spiritual side of human existence, without subtracting from their specificities. What is meant by the spiritual side of human existence is not spiritualism, the belief in some supra-human power. It indicates a broad range of mental states—feelings, emotions, aesthetic sense, the contemplative, the philosophical and more. Though the religious mind, spiritualism, may also be present, it is not a necessary factor. The

[3] *Theses on Feuerbach*, Karl Marx. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>

capacity of human consciousness, including that of reflecting on the circumstances of its existence, underlies the material basis of ethical thinking.

Tilak is guided by the belief that there is "something" beyond sensuous reality. He then accuses materialism of failing to go beyond sensuous appearances and grasp this essence. There are schools of materialism that hold the view that the apparent is all there is. That is wrong. One must no doubt go beyond appearances. But what exactly is the essence to be grasped? For Tilak it is the ultimate, eternal, singular *parabrahma* of *Advaida*.[4] However, even those materialist schools that insist on going beyond appearances to get at the essence understand it to be as material as the phenomenon being studied. Consistent materialism does not consider the essence to be something singular. There are essences—not a simple, all-embracing essence.[5]

Having set the record straight, we can now proceed to the real issue involved in arriving at a materialist ethics. It must be grounded in materialist reality. However this does not mean the use of materiality simply as a gross yardstick. Doing good or seeking satisfaction for the many can no doubt be assessed materially. Even then, that does not provide sufficient grounds for determining the ethics of those acts. Consider the case of an ethics guided by realising the mental and material satisfaction of the majority. While such sentiments are laudable, any attempt to fix the criterion of "satisfaction" turns out to be quite slippery. Satisfaction is a highly relative notion. Besides, something apparently benefiting the many may actually have been born from narrow individual interests.

Take the example of a capitalist starting a factory employing many workers. She or he can claim to be benefiting many people by giving them work and steady incomes. And this would be true. All the same, the motive of the capitalist was not to serve the interests of

[4] *Advaita*, literally "non-duality", is a monist stream within the Vedanta school of South Asian philosophy.

[5] Interestingly, one of the accusations made by Brahmanism against materialism is about its insistence on many essences instead of *Advaida's* "singular unity" (*Bhagavad Gita,* 16.8; GR, pp 516-17)

many. It came from the urge to deploy capital in order to appropriate surplus value created by the workers. Far more than the workers, the capitalist would benefit.

Western Europe's Enlightenment rooted ethics in rational thought. It thus freed it from theology. Ground was opened up for bringing forward materialist thinking on ethics. Yet, bourgeois rationalist thought could not fulfil the task it had set for itself. The interests of this class were thoroughly material. But, when these interests were enthroned as the determinant of ethics, when this ethics was declared to be universal, an irreparable contradiction came up. It made the elabouration of this ethics inconsistent in its materialism. This emerged from the wide gulf between the bourgeoisie's claim on universality and the reality of its narrow exploitative class interests. The only way the bourgeoisie could bridge this was by appealing to a normative notion of "humanity." Being so, it was something pre-conceived and thus idealist. The bourgeois notion of "humanity" is normative because it is circumscribed by its class interests. In its initial formulation it included only a tiny fraction—propertied white males. Whatever "concreteness" this concept later acquired mainly came through the struggles of various social sections and whole peoples initially excluded from it.

At present, at least in principle, the domain of the human is accepted as standing for all humanity. Even then, it still remains arbitrary. The determination of which of its claims are granted legitimacy remains limited by bourgeois class interests. So long as humanity is divided by oppressive social relations, this can never be resolved. They indicate social divisions, the continuing limits imposed on the "human." This has its implications for ethics. For imperialism, there is nothing wrong or inhuman in its plunder and exploitation of oppressed nations by investing finance capital in them. It considers this to be conducive to their "development." Similarly, excluding all consideration of the social privileges and advantages they still enjoy, the *Savarnas* believe that their insistence on merit and opposition to caste-based reservation is completely just. So too is the male attitude

on gender privileges and discrimination.

The "interests of humanity" becoming the determinant of ethics was indeed a historical advance, even if this remained at the conceptual level. Its abstract nature and limited range indicate that humanity must go beyond it.[6] Any concrete determination of the interests of humanity demands that they be placed in actually existing conditions. This will show that the vast majority of humans, whether they live in the advanced imperialist countries or backward oppressed nations, exist in inhuman conditions. Not just economic deprivation, there is also the denial of conditions necessary for the flowering of their human abilities. Any determination of human interests must take these conditions as its basis. That again would only be a beginning.

The oppressed are divided by class, caste, gender, ethnicity, race, nationality and religion, to name a few. Even while being broadly within the category of the oppressed, each of them have their sectoral interests. Can we take their sum total to determine the interests of humanity? No. The contradictions existing among them rule that out. Moreover, the presence of sectoral interests also indicates the possibility of separate resolutions. The specific oppression or exploitation suffered by one or the other social group may be overcome in this manner. To give an example from history, the *shudra* castes were part of the oppressed in early medieval caste-feudalism. Over time they have elevated their economic and social status. Presently, as part of the *Savarna* bloc, their elite are an inseparable component of the ruling classes. The upward movement of the rich peasantry and upper strata of the middle peasantry in different parts of the country is another example.

[6] "…as society has hitherto moved in class antagonisms, morality has always been class morality… That in this process there has on the whole been progress in morality, as in all other branches of human knowledge, no one will doubt. But we have not yet passed beyond class morality. A really human morality which stands above class antagonisms and above any recollection of them becomes possible only at a stage of society which has not only overcome class antagonisms but has even forgotten them in practical life." F. Engels in *Anti-Dühring*. https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/ch07.htm

Since sectoral interests are very much part of the existence of the oppressed, can there be one among them that could be taken for determining the vital elements of human interests and the means to satisfy them? A satisfactory resolution of this predicament requires the identification of a sectoral interest (both in its origin and articulation) that also has the potential to be all-encompassing. We need to identify a social group whose striving to satisfy its sectoral interests must, by necessity, simultaneously address the tasks posed by the challenge of achieving humane conditions of existence for all of humanity—in both the material and spiritual spheres.

The quest is answered by the proletariat. A particular section of this class may be able to gain better conditions of work or improve its standard of living. Between imperialist and oppressed countries and among various sections in a single country, their conditions of existence vary substantially. Some strata even get a share of surplus value squeezed out from other workers. Furthermore, it is scarred by the social divisions (race, caste, gender, etc.) of the society it exists in. Yet, despite all these blemishes, all sections and all strata of the class still suffer from exploitation of the surplus value they generate. That remains common to the whole class, even in the most ideal conditions of labour. Under capitalism, the proletariat suffers exploitation in the very act of production and the mutual contract it freely enters into with the capitalists. This then is the ultimate in exploitation. To emancipate itself from these conditions the proletariat must end all exploitation. Its emancipation is possible only with the emancipation of all humanity, by ending all relations and conditions permitting exploitation and oppression. It must persist in its epochal world-transformative role to that end if its objective is to be achieved. Karl Marx thus described it as the "last class."

This is the potential contained in the materialist conditions of existence of this class. Its realisation, however, is neither preordained nor pre-assured. That depends on arduous struggle, on the gaining of consciousness, of becoming a "class-for-itself." History cautions us that this process is by no means linear. Simultaneously, it also

demonstrates the world-transforming potential of this class. The interests of emancipating this class remain as the only reliable, consistent, determinant for elabourating a thoroughly materialist ethics, one that satisfies the needs of humanity in an all-round manner.

The world has already witnessed mighty efforts in this direction, transforming social conditions as well as the transformers. Despite yielding important gains these processes have suffered setbacks. Therefore any meaningful effort to reverse the backslide and continue forward must take up a critical examination of these historical experiences.

II

Substantial advance was made in the erstwhile socialist countries in terms of generating a new consciousness of ethics guided by social concern. Both in community living and workplaces, there were numerous real-life instances where people created new social norms, breaking away from self-interest. Cynics dismiss this as fleeting moments. They assert that the human is selfish by nature and this can never be changed. The present stage at which the human race has arrived gives ample refutation of this assertion. If not for the millions who stood up, facing heavy odds throughout history, if not for their sacrifice, humans would never have advanced this far. We can therefore safely ignore the eternal doubters. The question of why leaps to a new social consciousness could not be sustained cannot, however, be brushed off.

"Social existence determines social consciousness." The human essence is an ensemble of social relations. At present, they are marked by the exercise of domination, of oppressive privileging, of exploitation. This is taking place in various forms, in greater or lesser degrees, at all levels of society. All of them leave their stamp on the proletariat and its leading representatives. The complexity of human nature is created, conditioned and sustained by this materiality. Though it

would undergo a basic change in a socialist society a total transformation would be a long-drawn affair.

Rather than relying on preconceived schemata as standards for judging erstwhile socialist societies, the focus should be on this material reality, on the actual conditions that existed in those countries. We should try to identify material factors that enabled transformation of consciousness, a necessary condition for the emergence of new humans. We should also locate factors that impeded or resisted this transformation. Starting from this complex, contradictory reality, taking it as the sphere of social praxis, we will be on a firm footing in evaluating policies followed in those societies and identifying where they were lacking.

It would be best to focus our enquiry on the most advanced and latest experience in this regard, the Cultural Revolution (CR) of China. The declared aim of the CR was "transformation of world outlook." This directly engages with our topic of enquiry, thus justifying the choice.

The CR's emphasis on creating new consciousness unleashed the creative energies of the masses. It brought forth a high tide of critical thinking. New ideas and practices in governance, work, community living, education and a host of other spheres emerged. Some have argued that this flowering was made possible by a "freezing" of the Communist Party's active and all-embracing leading role. Its later return is considered as an imposition that stifled the CR's vigour and dampened mass activism.

The CR initially focused on overthrowing capitalist-roaders from the positions of power they had usurped. This was identified as the target. During this period, the functioning of the Party at the lowest levels was practically in a "state of suspension," for quite some-time. Traditional structures of governance and leadership were challenged. They often broke down or were overthrown. The locus of authority rapidly passed from one group to another. However, the central party leadership and its control over the army remained more or less intact. This was decisive in enabling and sustaining the

huge outpouring of the masses. The line of the Party and its leadership were of crucial importance in this.

The initial phase of CR saw the emergence of several new forms of exercising power, including the Shanghai Commune. The Commune was formed and based on the direct participation of the masses. However, instead of the Commune, eventually the Revolutionary Committee (RC) was finalised as the new form of power. The Party's leading role was retained in it. Though formed through a consultative process involving the masses, it was different from the Commune model. The leadership justified this choice by pointing out international and national constraints and contradictions. It explained that the commune model would have difficulties in handling them.

The turn to Revolutionary Committees and its consolidation have been criticised as a "going back" from the ideals of CR. It is said to be a factor that contributed to its ultimate defeat. What is missed in this criticism is the actual zigzag course of any radical advance. Its wave like progress through high tides, pauses and ebb is lost sight of. No people can continuously engage in a high pitch of struggle. Continuing divisions such as those of mental and manual labour, gender discrimination, the differential wage system and similar factors made the retention of "bourgeois right" inevitable.[7] This placed limits on the extent to which the advance would be taken forward. The hangovers from the past could only be eliminated through steady long drawn "digging away," a step-by-step process. They couldn't be ended abruptly. In view of all these factors, the turn to the CR's consolidation, retaining the leading role of the Party, cannot be taken as a retreat. It was a necessary prelude for a new advance.

A further deepening of the "transformation of world outlook" task took place in the later phase of the CR. This justifies the assess-

[7] The distributive principle of socialism—"… to each according to their labour."—ends the exploitative condition of living off the surplus labour of others. However, it is still based on the application of an equal standard of labour on people having uneven abilities, shouldering uneven responsibilities and so on. Thus, the equality in distribution still remains formal and to that extent is bourgeois in its nature. Hence bourgeois right.

ment made above. Going beyond targeting and pulling down capitalist-roaders, the struggle was developed to uncover the material base that gave birth to them and sustained them. Why did some of those who had contributed to the arduous struggle to achieve New Democracy turn into those obstructing further advance? What was the role of the continuing wage system, various contradictions and social divisions carried over from the past, in this negative turn? These and similar questions were posed and debated. In the process, material conditions that were favourable or inimical to the generation of new consciousness were uncovered. This was also a deepening of the materialist approach. It identified and strove to confront social relations as they actually existed. They were sought to be grasped in all their contradictoriness together with the varied consciousness they generated.[8]

Despite such heights achieved in that gigantic leap aimed at rupturing from centuries-old self-centred thinking and bringing about a radical transformation of consciousness, it was defeated. A wholesale promotion of self-interest, epitomised in the slogan "to get rich is good," took centre stage. Uneven balance of powers between the socialist-roaders and capitalist-roaders, adverse international conditions, problems in style of leadership and various other factors have been cited to explain the reversal. Even if in differing degrees, all of them seem to have played a role. The capitalist takeover was not a smooth affair. Fierce resistance came up in a number of provinces. This was an indication of an uneven, yet real, transformation of world outlook and the advance made in politicisation of the broad masses. Even after the resistance was crushed with brutal force, opposition to policies reversing the verdicts of the CR continued in China.

The legacy of the CR is still alive throughout the world. To do it justice and take it forward, negative trends inherent to the CR as it actually unfolded must be probed. Paucity of information makes

[8] 'On the Social Basis of the Lin Piao anti-Party Clique', Yao Wen-yuan and 'On Exercising All-round Dictatorship over the Bourgeoisie', Chang Chun-chiao were two important texts that dealt with this.

this a rather difficult task. Within this limitation, I venture some observations. Rather than final conclusions, they are more in the nature of suggesting a possible area of probing.

Art and literature were prominent among the many battle fronts of the CR. Within this, contention over the content and form of Chinese opera became quite intense. The old and outmoded were being sustained in opera by capitalist-roaders, through a repertoire taken over from the past. For example, under the plea of retaining "classicism," the feudal outlook of demeaning women was being perpetrated. This was done through roles and restricted movements allowed to them. The "model operas" guided by socialist-roaders came up in opposition to this. They were a welcome break. First-person accounts of how these operas impacted the masses and unleashed their artistic creativity are available. Even then, the treatment of themes of arduous struggle and sacrifice seen in the model operas does raise some questions.

The dominant approach was one of projecting "the positive side of the positive character."[9] Their heroines and heroes were presented as perfect, without blemishes. Even when they started out with inner conflicts, further progress, especially after acquiring communist awareness, was portrayed as linear. The consciousness of selfless service to the people these operas tried to inculcate would surely have suffered from this linearity. Such treatment fails to deeply engage with the actual process through which ordinary people emerge as heroines or heroes of the masses. The internal conflicts they pass through gets very little attention. Real leaders are replaced by "perfect" ones, even dragging in a sense of super-capacities. The treatment would thus have hindered an appreciation of the relativity of the "perfect."

An element of idealism is indicated in this that did not accord with the basic ideological, theoretical vision guiding the CR. Nor did it correspond to the theoretical advances made during the CR in identifying the social, material, bases of reaction in a socialist

[9] See Jiang Qing, *On the Revolution of Peking Opera*. https://www.marxists.org/archive/jiang-qing/1964/july/0001.htm

society. These advances had given a new awareness. They taught that the emergence of capitalist-roaders and their efforts to reverse the advance of society was not simply a matter of the conspiracies of some "bad" people. It was realised that they emerged from the very relations of the new society. In a certain sense their path was cleared by the new society through eliminating the class rule of the old exploiters. Individuals, events and the whole ensemble of social relations were being grasped and addressed in an all-round manner by this new understanding, appreciating their contradictory nature. In spite of the positive contribution of the "model operas" in overthrowing the old, their one-sided projection of the "perfect" departed from this new approach. Ultimately, it would give some negative results.

"Fight selfishness, struggle against revisionism" was one of the key slogans of the CR. It captures its essence, indicating the target (revisionism) and aim (transforming one's own consciousness). It placed the fight against one's own selfishness and gaining new social consciousness as a key corollary and necessity in the struggle to overthrow capitalist-roaders and prevent new ones from emerging. To remain consistent to this teaching, the heroines and heroes of the people needed to be depicted in their actuality, in their ordinariness. Neither pure nor ideal but struggling against their own and society's inhibiting factors to attain new heights. The perfection of those who have attained those heights would be that of real people, who achieved it with all their flaws. It would still be imperfect.

Given the scanty information available, this observation can only be put forward as a surmise. It has been claimed that Mao Zedong had, at one point, criticised the model opera repertoire of hampering a broad emergence of new forms and variety. That may be true. There is, however, no indication of his criticising the very approach, their very treatment of the themes.

Another trend, contrary to the spirit of CR was seen in the tendency to adulate the new heights of ideology. It was almost projected as some sort of a "magic wand," something already containing

answers to everything. A personality cult extolling the leadership reinforced this. It has been stated that these approaches had their roots in the views and practices of a section of the leadership that was actually trying to derail the CR. Corrections seen in the second phase of CR offer corroboration. In this phase, central propaganda took care to project how the new heights of ideology had the capacity to solve real-life problems, provided it was applied as a guide. A dialectical critique of the old, including past exploitative systems, was promoted. The ups and downs of the Chinese people's response and resistance to imperialism, giving due recognition to the objective output of feudal reforms too, was elabourated.

Yet, all said, some elements of idealist, mechanical thinking do seem to be indicated at the leading levels of the CR itself. In social life that could get crystallised as a tendency to erect the ideal; arbitrarily claiming some unique right to do so. With its insistence on conformity, the social atmosphere generated would be one of stifling the lively activism and expression of the masses. True, that ideal would surely be sanctioned by new conditions created through the CR. The insistence on sticking to it would appear to be justified as defence against capitalist-roaders. But that could only be one aspect. Handling the ideal as something to be conformed to, rather than as an ongoing striving, would strongly tend to overlook the thriving contradictoriness of the people itself, the source of their creativity. It would also fail to see that some aspects of the new may have themselves be made obsolete by this continuous process.

Certitude is no doubt essential in any endeavour, even more so when it's aim is world-transforming. So too are faith and loyalty. Yet, when this tends towards perceiving reality in terms of absolute opposites, when faith and loyalty get deployed as principle guarantees of staying the course, the ever-present tendency to seek out absolutes, whether, as principles or leaderships, plays up. This is, to a great extent, related to the way humans must go ahead with their lives, with all of its complexities. They cannot live in relativeness, though their lives are, overall, in that relation to their conditions of

existence. These have their certainties, no doubt. But, quite often, they get treated as absolutes. The quest to achieve a new consciousness, underlying a new ethics of social communion, must necessarily accept this limitation and handle it dialectically.

To this we must further add the problem of ideology. As world outlook, it guides praxis. But that praxis itself makes part of this ideology redundant. For example, in the beginning phase of the CR, the focus was on overthrowing the capitalist-roaders. Once that was achieved, deepening and consolidating the new came to the forefront. That demanded changes in pace along with the working out of the new. If this was missed or taken up in a weak manner, consolidation would also be weakened. Ideology would not keep pace with changing conditions and new tasks. Where the earlier frame of thinking remains dominant, false consciousness, an ever-present element in ideology, would become predominant. The sphere of praxis would be conceived in terms of the earlier reality. It would be a construct of the previous thought frame, rather than the new reality with its new set of challenges. This would inevitably promote idealism and mechanical dogmatic approaches.

III

The experience of the CR and the theoretical insights it gave remind us of the reality of socialist society. It speaks of actual "social existence" in those conditions and the real problems that must be tackled while striving to create conditions for the emergence of a new consciousness. The project of a materialist ethics based on the class interest of the proletariat must proceed from here. Evaluation of the past can help in identifying positive gains that need to be built on for future advances. Mistakes to be avoided can also be noted. Yet, it would be foolish to rush forward and decide on policies and methods for a future socialist society. They can only be worked out in the concrete conditions existing at that time, within that country

and in the world. The past can only give guidance. However, that doesn't mean that the insights and warnings given can be canned for now and kept aside. To the extent possible, within existing material constraints, those lessons must be applied. The unleashing of the potential contained in the proletariat and the working out of a new ethics always remains an ongoing process.

The how and when of actualising these are best answered by those directly engaged in the process of transforming material conditions. Keeping that limitation in mind, some observations are attempted here. In large parts of the country, the struggle for control of "Jal, Jungle and Jameen" (water, jungle and land—the 3Js) and the power to decide their use is going on. People's rights over local resources are being asserted against attempts to plunder them for the narrow interests of a tiny minority.

Two issues come up in the context. Local right over resources cannot be taken in an absolute sense, in the sense of reserving local resources solely for local use. Since the local is part of the society from which it draws on, a sound policy must incorporate such broader interests too. That calls for careful thought. The dispossession of people and grabbing of resources going on now is also done in the name of "larger interests." Even when the people are given some share under the pressure of fierce struggle, it is vastly inferior in quality and quantity to the gains being made by the appropriators. It goes to reinforce relations of exploitation and oppression. Moreover, the key issue is not of "share" but of how and for whom it must be used. So how would the relation of the local and broader social interests be handled in future? The models that emerged through the CR give some direction. Decentralised production aiming at regional self-sufficiency to the maximum possible extent and the integration of industry and agriculture are of particular relevance. In the light of problems thrown up by ever higher levels of integration of the economy, countrywide and at the world level, these initial steps promoted by the CR need to be taken forward.

That brings us to the second issue. To do justice to "control

over the 3Js" its essence must be taken as one of relying and building on local resources. How far can this be done? Material constraints, including the volatility of the situation, cannot be ignored while seeking an answer to this. Yet, within these limits, more thought needs to be paid to this matter. It has to be made a key issue in the consciousness of building the new and the actual process of realising it. On a long-term basis, this directly touches on a very powerful challenge that will be faced by any new society. This is the severing of relations with the world imperialist system and standing on one's own feet. Going beyond economics, it directly touches on the political. It is closely tied up with the development of a new ethics.

The "theory of productive forces" was one of the views subjected to sharp criticism during the CR. It held that efforts should be mainly made to develop productive forces. It refused to give prime place to the transformation of the superstructure and relations of production. Investment volumes and advanced technology were taken as the key factors for development. In opposition to this the socialist-roaders insisted on putting politics in command, on raising consciousness and achieving faster, better growth through innovations relying on available resources. The need to promote self-reliance as key in achieving real control over the 3Js should be related to this lesson of the CR. It becomes all the more crucial in the present context of globalisation and the unbridled consumerism it energetically promotes. It wouldn't do to put this aside as premature and consider it as a task that can be taken up in the future. Foundations need to be laid in mass consciousness keeping future tasks in mind. The very process of moving towards the new society has to generate and reinforce this thinking.

There is a huge, qualitative, difference between the radical transitions of the 20th century and the present. The sense of deprivation, views on minimum conditions and comforts of existence and social aspirations—all of these widely differ. This has ideological implications. New impediments, as well as openings, awareness, favouring advances have come up. Among them, the growing realisation of the

impossibility of continuing with the presently dominant mode of production, consumption and style of living, has great importance. That is true not just for the future of humanity. It is also an entry point towards broadening the domain of the human and by extension of ethics.

IV

Earlier we saw how ethical thinking advanced to recognition of human interests as its principle determinant. We also saw how its further advance rests on realising the potential of the proletariat to transform the world by emancipating all humanity. However, a growing volume of critical thinking and the conditions we live in drive in a vital message. The interests of humanity cannot be determined solely within the limits of the human species, its existence and needs. It must encompass the whole globe with all of its species and geographical features and climatic conditions.

Scientific opinion is already moving towards recognising that the Earth has entered a new epoch—the Anthropocene. This is an acknowledgment of the fundamental and irreversible way in which humans have affected the planet in all dimensions of its existence.[10] There is the physical implication, the threat of destroying the conditions of existence of humanity and "extincting" ourselves. There is also an ethical issue. Do we humans have the right to pursue our needs disregarding the consequences for the existence and sustenance of Nature?

The answer to this ultimately touches on what is meant by subordinating self-interests, what we define as narrow selfishness. In terms of the globe and all that exists on it, a singular pursuit of human needs causing their destruction should indeed qualify as selfishness. And that would stand even though everything being

[10] The term Anthropocene has been questioned for its disappearing of inequalities and the class forces directly responsible for planetary change. Some have proposed "capitalocene" as a more accurate description.

wiped out is unable to comprehend this in those terms. This is not some notion of "animal rights" or a matter of going back to earlier practices, a "return to Nature." The present realisation of the consequences of our actions, this ability to reflect on them, is solely human. Furthermore, it is a product of a long chain of scientific thought and practice made possible by the modern age.[11]

No other species has or can have awareness of its "rights." To conceive of "rights," to "think" about other species or the globe is a uniquely human capability. Ecological chains of mutually supporting non-human species have emerged from their instincts of existence and reproduction. They are not born of consciousness, of mutual respect for each other's "rights." We must also not forget that it isn't only humans who have wiped out many species. Other animals and plants have also done this, eventually causing their own extinction. The difference is that we, as a species, have consciousness. That gives us the potential to rise above our immediate interests and think out the consequences of our modes of existence. We alone can comprehend the need to radically change our style of living; not just for the sake of our species but for the whole globe. We alone can consciously grasp that we are a part of Nature, neither above nor beside it.

Incorporation of ecological sensibility thus becomes a vital part of a consistently materialist ethics. It also calls for a purposeful rupture from anthropocentric thinking. Here we need to further develop the critique of Brahmanism. It is sometimes argued that, despite all its faults, Brahmanism must be commended for its broad vision on the nature-human relation. Retaining and worshipping small patches of pristine nature as sacred groves, worshipping a tree and begging its pardon before cutting it down, principles of conservation set out in texts like "Arthasastra" and many more examples are cited to justify the claim. While all that is true, Brahmanism too (like all other theology) grants a "special place" for humans in the

[11] Though there is much that can be learned from societies usually dismissed as "primitive" that again is made possible by modern sensibilities.

"larger scheme" of a Supreme Being.[12] Unlike Abrahamic religions, it does not declare the Earth and everything seen on it to be created by a god for the enjoyment of man. However, the very concept of a pre-ordained "special mission" or a place for man firmly places it within the fold of a male-privileged anthropocentrism.

There is no special reason for the emergence of the human race. Neither is there any special need justifying its continued existence, other than that common to all species—to sustain itself. The point to grasp is that consciousness makes humans different from other species, not special. We can be considered "higher" on an evolutionary scale starting from the inanimate, but never so in a judgmental sense; as something given by some super-abilities or power.[13]

Lack in ecological awareness and incomplete rupture from anthropocentrism were two of the major flaws of the erstwhile efforts to win and build socialism. It is not the case that these were ignored altogether. Both the founders of Marxism gave valuable insights. In particular, Marx's critique of the rupture caused in the nature-human metabolism by capitalism directly engages with questions posed by contemporary ecological concerns. Similarly, Engels' debunking of human supremacy and ridiculing claims about humans as "masters of nature" provides firm ground for taking on anthropocentrism. Yet, these insights were not brought to the fore or worked out as an integral part of the Communist project. One can cite a number of historical, objective reasons for this. Even then, the harm caused by this lack, amplified in later years and in the actual practice of building socialism, cannot be denied. It must be surmounted as part of the project to reverse setbacks.

While reviewing the past, a qualitative distinction must be made. The side-lining of environmental concerns in socialist societies took place in a context of strenuous efforts to build a society

[12] "Man is brought to birth in order to carry out through him the special role he has been appointed to within the activity of creation that goes on by the will of Paramesvara." (*GR*, p 265; translated from Marathi)

[13] *GR*, p 63. Tilak quotes from Manusmriti's elabouration of the "progress" from the inanimate to the perfect state of oneness with Parabrahma. Not surprisingly, this is said to take place "via the Brahmin male."

free from exploitation. It cannot be bracketed with the destruction inflicted upon Nature by capitalism's profit motive. The ideals to which the former aspired allows a rectification of this lapse. It would in fact strengthen those ideals and make them more perfect. The latter, by its very dynamic, is restricted to technological fixes that ultimately go to serve the same profit motive that made them necessary in the first place. Keeping this qualitative distinction in mind, we must try to identify problems in the thinking that guided the building of socialism. We must seek out lacunae that caused the muting and even downright ignoring of ecological concerns.

One issue that comes to mind is that of the social organisation of production. The socialisation of production brought about under capitalism, within the factory and in the broader economy, was a historical advance. But can the proletariat simply take it over after "expropriating the expropriators?" Doesn't the profit motive, intrinsic to capitalism, mark each and every aspect of its socialisation of production? The development of capitalist socialisation of production to its present heights of imperialist globalisation poses these questions even more acutely. Decentralisation and outsourcing of the production process across a number of countries is a notable feature of the present globalised world economy. While this gives super profits to imperialists and comprador corporates, it reduces the workers' opportunities for struggle and puts heavy strain on the environment. Aggravated ravaging of resources and complex, costly chains of transportation in both production and consumption are prominent.

Obviously, this sort of socialisation of production is neither necessary nor sustainable. It would have to be uprooted, broken up, in a future society that gives due weight to environmental concerns. The rupture from capitalist forms of socialisation of production should be taken further within individual countries. Possibilities of decentralised economic models, stressing self-reliance, must be taken up at the level of theory and practice. It should be linked with the elimination of major social divisions. Some beginning was made

in the direction through Mao's "Critique of Soviet Economics" and the new forms of social organisation in production that came up in erstwhile socialist China. They give direction for the future.

* * *

Ethics is usually treated as something separate from politics. It has, of course, its own specificities that demand distinct treatment. But there can be no ethics devoid of politics. The pinning of ethics on the edicts of some beyond the world power seen in most idealist views is itself an example of the politics involved. In this case it is the hiding of class interests that actually underlies ethics. Ethics is essentially removed by idealism from the domain of human agency. The categorisation of the good and bad is based on preconceived values said to be given by a superhuman power. These value systems invariably insist on the submission of the labouring classes to their masters, as something ordained by a god. Thus the wholly materialist character of the class interests of the exploiters, in both its political and economic dimensions, get faded out. They are now presented as god-given endowments, essentially spiritualistic.

A consistently materialist ethics, one that dialectically comprehends social existence within the wider context of Nature, has to be explicit about its politics. Just as the ethics of the proletariat has to be political, its politics too must be ethical. The radical transformation of the world necessarily calls for the simultaneous transformation of its own consciousness by the leading class. Within that process, an ethical thinking oriented on becoming truly humane must be consciously promoted. This implies a ceaseless struggle to end all exploitation and oppression, and of acquiring awareness of ecological responsibilities as part of the consciousness that this struggle demands.



On the Laws of History

Humans must carry out production to satisfy their needs. While engaging in this they use tools. They work on raw materials. In this process they enter into different relations with each other. Such relations are of several types—relations among the direct producers; between them and those who control production and corner its surplus; and among the latter. All of these elements together constitute a "mode of production." The mode of production of a social system has distinctive features. In the case of capitalism we see the use of machinery, artificial sources of energy and increasing socialisation of the production process. Production is carried out with free labour—i.e. the labour of workers who are free to sell their labour power to any capitalist. Capitalism is marked by a complex division of labour.

This mode of production has had a global character from the very beginning. It tends to recreate the whole world in its own image. This stems from the inner tendency of capitalism. Hence, the features of this mode of production are almost identical in all the countries where it has taken root and grown. But this was not the case in the various pre-capitalist modes of production that existed in different regions of the world. Each one of them was unique. To give some examples, the Incan empire, which was centred in present-day Peru, had features similar to slavery and feudalism as they existed in Western Europe. It also had many features seen in tribal societies. In South Asia, the tribal kingdoms of the Gangetic plains developed into what was termed as *shudra*-holding mode of

production by Saket Rajan.[1] While exhibiting similarities to slave or feudal societies, it was neither. Pre-colonial Africa had a few large tribal kingdoms, which also exploited slave labour. Slave trade too was prevalent, though far less in volume compared to that of the colonial period.

The *shudra*-holding mode of production extended all the way to present-day Karnataka. It later transformed into caste-feudalism. But this was not simply "feudalism + caste." At the bottom level, bonded labour (mainly of *Dalits*) and tenancy of *Shudra* and *Avarna* castes (presently categorised as Other Backward Classes) existed. Caste was both a division of labour and of labourers. Unique trajectories of social transformation and varied geo-social circumstances in different regions of the sub-continent laid their own stamp on this development. In a region on the south-western coastal strip, presently Keralam, landless *Dalits* and some *Adivasi* tribes existed as "*adiyalar*." They were bought, sold, rented out or mortgaged. "*Adiyalar*" markets existed right up till the mid-19th century. Incidentally, this unique mode of caste-feudalism emerged directly from the tribal kingdoms of an earlier period.

These examples show us that the schemata of "primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism" mistakenly elevates the particular trajectory of Western Europe's historical development to a universal, general law. Whereas, in fact, any enumeration of the "general" features of slavery or feudalism would be true only for that limited part of the world. If, instead, they are treated as universal models, the diverse pre-capitalist modes of production would be treated as mere variations from some pre-determined standard. This would block a deeper probing of the specificities of various modes of production. What was (and is) common for all modes of production were (are) its dual components—productive forces and relations of production. The concreteness of their existence and interaction, the unity and struggle between them, in a specific mode of production was always unique. It remains so.

[1] *Making History: Karnataka's People and their Past—Volume 1*, Saki, Vimukti Prakashana, Bengaluru, 1998

The specific modes of surplus extraction from the direct producers determine and distinguish distinct social systems. However, it wouldn't do to treat this simplistically. Take the "*adiyalar*" situation. They were traded like cattle just as in any slave society. Yet, "*adiyalar*" trade was not simply slave trade. "*Adiyalatham*" was always mediated through caste (or tribe). Only *Dalits* (and a few tribes like the *Paniyar* and *Adiyar*) were "*adiyalar*." Moreover, "*adiyalar*" were not only traded. They could be mortgaged or rented out on terms identical to similar transactions in land. The primary condition for "*adiyalatham*" was the denial of all land rights, including tenancy, to those subjected to it. Denial of right to land was something uniquely suffered by all *Dalit* castes in South Asia. It was a prominent feature of caste-feudal societies. Yet, "*adiyalatham*" was not common. And, despite some similarities in the mode of surplus extraction, it was distinct from slavery.

So what does all of this tell us about the concepts of historical materialism, of the laws of historical transition it propounds? How should we grasp and apply them? There is a strong current in what is known as "Western Marxism" that denies such laws altogether. It argues that this was never mentioned by Marx. In its view, such laws were later interjected by Engels. This argument is readily contradicted by Marx's Preface for "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy." There he wrote about the dialectics of the relations of production and productive forces, of the base and superstructure. He gave an outline of how their correspondence turns into antagonism, leading to revolution and the birth of a new social system. Clearly, he was indicating universal laws of social dynamics and transformation.

Admittedly that doesn't settle the matter completely. Is Marxism correct in conceptualising such laws? Hasn't it led to a linear view of historical development? The existence of that tendency and the harm it has caused is undeniable. Those afflicted by it tend to analyse concrete social formations by way of reference to a supposedly universal trajectory of historical transformation. Analysis is cen-

tred on determining whether the society being studied was a "form" of slavery or feudalism, etc. Progression through such stages is taken as an absolute law of history. The task of historical study is seen as that of seeking out and following the operation of this law, tracing out how it worked out in a particular society. Needless to say, study of the particularities of that society and analysis of their interactions is reduced to mere enumeration.

Despite this, damage wrought by this tendency can't be the rationale to abandon the advance achieved through Marxism's synthesising of the laws of historical transition and its analytical categories. On the contrary, they must be firmly adhered to, especially in the face of the post-modernist tarring of them as "meta-narratives." Postists would have it that the very conception of such laws and categories is erroneous since it inevitably brushes out all diversity, particularities and micro-domains. Is that really so? Can we do without such categories? Leave aside those advanced by Marxism, how would the post-modernist "meta-narrative" itself stand up to its own opposition? As a concept it too is an abstraction from multiple particularities. Even if we were to decide to stick to the micro-level, as opposed to a meta-level, there wouldn't be any escape. That very micro-level could easily be demonstrated as another "meta-narrative," albeit quite restricted. We would end up trapped in a vicious circle.

Lenin offers a way out from this dead end. He points out how every law is a freezing of reality. Our identification of some aspects or relations of a phenomenon while deriving a law is an abstraction from the complexity of its real motion and existence. This is why it is a "freezing." It is no doubt necessary and fruitful. Yet it is also always incomplete. This is equally true of all laws formulated by Marxism and its several categories of analysis. If guided by this awareness, Marxist categories and laws would be applied as abstractions that grasp some essentials and provide orientation. We would be able to refine and enrich them further through creative application.

The rich rewards of rupture from mechanical thinking were well

reaped in Marxist historiography by D. D. Kosambi in India. While the CPI's theoreticians like Dange remained stuck in identifying different periods in the history of the sub-continent with pre-set stages like primitive communism, slavery, etc., Kosambi forged a new path in historical study. Grasping the essence of Marxist historical materialism, he sought to unravel the social forms and contradictions generated through the dialectic of forces/relations of production. This lead to a breakthrough in identifying the role and operation of caste in its transformative and socio-economic functions. His studies also contributed to the methodology of Marxist historical studies and enlarged its scope and sources by creatively drawing upon living history as embodied in popular folklore and myths.

When properly understood, the role and relations of caste help us grasp categories such as relations/forces of production or base/superstructure and their dynamics in an organic manner. Human labour is one of the factors of productive forces. As a division of labour, caste enabled specialisation and thus promoted productivity. But the rigid, segregated nature of this division of labour underlies its other role as a division of labourers. Over time, the advantage it gave through specialisation turned into its opposite. Fresh knowledge or technique was blocked by rigid segregation. Specialisation was reduced to narrow rote. It was further compounded by the forcible separation of mental and manual labour and the prevention of any interaction between the two. Caste, in both of its functions, was enforced through Brahmanism's "karma" theory. One's birth into a caste is seen by this theory as a favour or retribution for the "karma" of one's past lives. Thus, even a perfunctory exploration of caste brings out the organic nature of the production relations-productive forces, base-superstructure opposites. We are also reminded that these categories are abstractions made from a single whole. They are facets of a unity as it actually exists, of a unique social system.

Caste, as both division of labour and of labourers, directly reveals the base/superstructure relation. In its former dimension it is part of the relations of production, belonging to the base. In the lat-

ter, as control and domination over the labour force, it is part of the superstructure. Yet, for quite a long time, the debate among Marxists in India was whether it should be placed in the base or superstructure. This negative fruit of mechanical conceptualisation was further worsened by a class reductionist approach. The primacy of class was treated as an exclusion of all other social forms. This again became an additional reason for denying caste's role in the base.

The class-caste relation offers rich material to probe the mediations of class—of class as it actually exists. It is also helpful in grasping the caste system as a dynamic one. We can thus break away from its depiction as stagnant, bereft of any internal impulse. This is very important for Marxist studies of the sub-continent. Operating with the available information, Marx viewed the caste system as an unchanging one. He argued that this had caused the sub-continent to remain stagnant for centuries, transforming only under external conquest. This picture of stagnation has long since been abandoned by most Marxist theoreticians. They have correctly concluded that very little theoretical value should be accorded to these writings of Marx. They were journalistic pieces; the information he relied on was quite patchy and superficial. Yet, there still are some who swear by them and declare them to be gems of Marxist scholarship. If anything, this is a gross indication of the continuing grip of mechanical thinking. Unravelling the mediations of class and the dynamics of the caste system will be of great help in unmasking such vulgarisations.

Despite being units of a division of labour, caste was never synonymous with class. Even during classical caste-feudalism, at the bottommost level, economic differentiation existed among *Dalit* castes. Though present in a most rudimentary form, it already indicated caste and class as different social forms. For example, the "*talapulayan*" (headman) of the *Pulayar* enslaved to a landlord enjoyed economic privileges like a tiny patch of paddy, reserved for the exclusive benefit of his family. At other levels of the caste system, such as among the *Brahmins*, class differentiation was far more

distinct. Towards the later period of caste-feudal societies, especially while being transformed into semi-feudalism under colonialism, this became more clear-cut. Class and caste stood apart in greater degrees. Their distinction has become even more apparent today. Yet, the mediation of class through caste (and other social forms), and vice versa, remains. Today too, the vast majority of the labouring classes come from the dominated castes, particularly *Dalits*. At the other end, the exploiting classes are overwhelmingly from the dominant castes, mostly *Savarna*. The pattern remains the same in the matter of assets as well.

This has major implications for mobilisation and social activism. Where the class sought to be mobilised is composed mainly of one caste, progress is rapid once a breakthrough is made. But, if it includes people from several castes, particularly those at differing levels of the caste order, the task becomes complex. Class unity built on a suppression of its caste mediations (tensions) proves brittle and even counter-productive. Solid class unity, the forging of class consciousness, can only be achieved by addressing the caste divide through incorporating the component of caste annihilation in class struggle. (This is equally true of gender and other social divisions.) Such is the process by which the proletariat can truly become a "class-for-itself" in the particular context of our country. This process must be led on both the material (practice) and ideal (ideology) planes. More specifically, realising the potential of the proletariat to become the vanguard is directly related to its ability to address the multiple relations of suppression and exploitation. Every one of them are facets of a single social existence. They are, in fact, so many mediations of the class domination it must overthrow and the exploitation it must end.

This does not mean that caste or other social forms/relations are mere extensions or manifest forms of class. That is not what is meant by the primacy of class. Mediation is not a one-way affair. Identifying and exploring the class mediations of caste or other social forms is equally possible. Caste, and all other social forms, have their

own, intrinsic, dynamic. They in turn interact with that of class and influence it. In an exploitative society, all of these social relations are shaped and reproduced to serve the interests of the ruling class. The elimination of all these oppressive social constructs hinges on overthrowing this class and its state. This is the material basis of the primacy of class. However, it is neither absolute nor self-constructive. Its realisation depends on the capacity of the vanguard class to grasp the particularities and dynamics of diverse forms and relations of social oppression. Its success in developing suitable policies and practice to address them is what matters. If that is missed, then, precisely because of the intrinsic dynamic of these social forms/relations, one or the other will gain prominence as a pole of mobilisation.

Let us now move on to the dynamics of the caste system. The caste system is a graded order. Each caste has a pre-assigned, rigidly fixed, position. The dynamics of this system stemmed from this very ordering itself. Any ordering always poses, potentially, the possibility of a reordering. One of the sources of such reordering was the expansion of caste-feudalism through the swallowing up of tribes. In this process, different layers of tribes, or whole tribes, were incorporated as new castes. An expansion or reorganisation of the existing division of labour inevitably took place. At times this entailed a repositioning of castes. Wars and conquests leading to a boost in the fortunes of some and disaster for others was another impulse. On some occasions this also led to a caste reverting to a tribe.

Apart from such contingent causes, the very role of caste as a division of labour, and consequently, its role in promoting productivity, was an ever-present potential driver in the reordering of the caste order. Over a period, the rise in surplus became an enabling factor for an upper stratum to form within the caste or castes positioned at the higher levels of the pecking order among the dominated castes. Increasing prosperity in turn provided impetus to the ever-present urge for elevating their status in the caste order. The desire to make it commiserate with their newfound economic status

became compulsive. This the caste system does not allow. The repositioning they desired could then come about only through challenging the very rationale of caste ordering, of the caste system and the ideology of Brahmanism underpinning it. This was the dynamic spurring on the numerous anti-caste movements led by socio-religious reformers, broadly known as Bhakti movements. Incidentally, these movements most usually counterposed a broad, inclusive community to the narrow exclusivity of caste. Articulated in native tongues, they represented the early stirrings of emergent nationalities in the sub-continent.

Most of these movements eventually re-accommodated Brahmanism. Even when one broke away, like Sikhism, it recreated the caste order within the new religious community. Even then, in one way or another, the caste system as it existed in different regions underwent a reordering. Some of the erstwhile dominated castes became part of the dominating castes. At the level of production, the constraints of the earlier division of labour were overcome through the new order. Control over assets, such as land, was restructured.

The whole process also reveals the role of class within the dynamics of the caste system. Given that caste was a division of labour belonging to a specific mode of production, this was inevitable. But it was not a linear process. The reordering of the caste system cannot be reduced to "a form of the working out of class dynamics." The primary cultural compulsions propelling the caste in the van were uniquely drawn from caste oppression. The contours and content of religious protest were framed and inspired by ripening contradictions within Brahmanist theology. Class and caste, culture and theology, all of them were activated and propelled by their own dynamics, interacting with and interpenetrating each other.

The transformation of the *Ezhavar*, an *Avarna* caste of Thiruvitamkoor (the southern part of present-day Keralam) under conditions of colonial modernity, well illuminates the above dialectic. The particular caste position of the *Ezhavar* was conducive for utilising some of the new economic opportunities opened up by colonialism.

An upper stratum of the caste prospered through it. Yet, their social status remained unchanged, even continuing to suffer untouchability. This contradiction articulated itself in the mobilisation and struggles of the *Ezhavar* at several levels—religious, ideological, political, social, cultural and economic. Consequently, a major change took place in their social status and opened up further avenues for growth. This, overwhelmingly, benefited its upper stratum. It is now an inseparable part of the ruling class. But the Brahmanic outlook continues to place this caste among the *Avarnas*. The great majority of *Ezhavar* remain part of the exploited classes. Even the rich upper stratum is still outweighed in economic clout by the Malayalee Nair, Christian and Muslim elite, all of whom enjoy *Savarna* status. Yet, in social agency it has acquired strength, allowing it to stand up to the *Savarnas*.

Social awakening engendered through the whole process encompassed all of the *Ezhavar* as a caste. Consequently, encouraged by agents of this caste awakening, *Ezhavar* workers linked up to form the first trade union among the nascent proletariat in the coir industry of Thiruvithamkoor. They later went on to break away from the casteist control exercised by *Ezhavar* capitalists, thus immensely contributing to the growth of a class-conscious workers' movement and the laying of foundations for the communist movement in Keralam.

Let me conclude. History as it evolved was never linear. Neither is society as it exists. Even then, the movement of this complex, chaotic whole does reveal certain laws. One can determine certain analytical categories. Marxism aids us in identifying, grasping and employing them to understand history and society. Simultaneously, it also reminds us of the limits of these categories of analysis. It warns us against treating them as rigid moulds waiting for content, rather than as markers and aids in the process of unravelling objective truth.



The Vanguard in the 21st Century

For a rather big section of the broad left, the first decade of this century was all about Hugo Chavez (late president of Venezuela) and Chavismo. Chavez was among one of the world leaders who came to power on a left platform in some South American countries. He stood out with his distinct ideological, political vision. Quite a few leftist intellectuals hailed and promoted it as the "socialism of the 21st century." The Chavez government enjoyed the support of a broad spectrum of social sections. This was often referred to as a "rainbow coalition." It was propounded as an eminent form of political inclusiveness and counterposed to the Leninist vanguard concept. The erstwhile socialist societies were accused of being exclusivist and marked by the rule of a party elite. This was seen as an outcome of the vanguard concept.

Within a decade or so much of the leftist stance of the governments that had come to power in South American countries became quite diluted. In the case of Venezuela the crash in oil price sent its economy into a disastrous tailspin. Under conditions of severe economic stress, amplified enormously by US imperialism-led sanctions, many of the social welfare schemes introduced by Chavez had to be reduced to their skeletal remains. The "rainbow" of the coalition is now a pale shadow—if it at all still lingers on. Capitalising on the breakdown in the system and hardships caused by economic crisis, anti-Chavista forces funded and instigated by US imperialism have been able to widen their appeal. Some sections of the middle classes have gone over to them. Given the social influence exerted by this class in these types of societies, one can expect that they

have pulled along some from the bottom layers as well. The statist approach of the Chavistas would also have played its part in alienating quite a few among the basic masses.

Chavez was instrumental in setting up a broad alliance of South American countries trying to reset or reduce their dependence on US imperialism. This brought him and his party into sharp contradiction with successive US regimes. All of them continuously tried to undermine and overthrow Chavista rule. They supported and instigated rightist forces within the country. This has intensified in recent years.

All governments that have attempted to go against one or other imperialist power have faced similar situations. Critical economic downturns make them more vulnerable. What we see in Venezuela is therefore not unusual. Even then, it still cannot be easily dismissed as an inevitable development. Both the unique nature of the crisis faced by that country as well as the limitations faced by the present Maduro government in fully unleashing the revolutionary potential of the basic classes against the Rightists, the tools of Yankee imperialism, stem from disabilities inherent to Chavismo.

Venezuela made some notable advances in public services under Chavez. Between 1998 and 2007 health coverage went up six-fold. Pension benefits tripled. Secondary education enrolment increased by nearly 25 percent and daily calorie consumption by 50 percent. These are just some sample indicators. All of this was made possible by channelising a large share of the country's oil earnings into public services. Chavez succeeded in overriding stiff resistance, both internal and external, to such redistributive policies with the backing of popular support. But he hardly made a dent in the lopsided dependence of the country on its oil income. As a result, Venezuela remained enmeshed in ties of dependence to imperialism. The unfolding of the global financial crisis and the subsequent prolonged recession leading to the crash in oil prices only served to bring out this debility.

Chavez could neither broad-base the economy nor advance it

towards self-reliance. Some have justified this with arguments on tactical difficulties in breaking out of long-standing relations of dependence. One can well admit that the elimination of centuries-old ties of dependence is a tough, prolonged task. It will have to go through a zigzag process, facing great difficulties and disruptions. The Venezuelan situation, however, cannot be explained away like that.

Chavizmo did not envisage a radical break from imperialist dependence. Neither did it call for the elimination of capitalism. Rather, its project was limited to populist reforms, resets and adjustments within these bounds of dependence and exploitation. Guided by a pessimistic view of the world situation and a negative appraisal of the setbacks in the erstwhile socialist countries, it could never go beyond that restricted agenda. It is not the case that Chavez's assertive policies and efforts to promote a South American grouping, separate from US-led bodies, were gimmicks. They were surely genuine. But for all that, they remained well within the space for opposition allowed under neo-colonialism. The flexible, broad coalition devised by Chavizmo was not a counter-hegemonic bloc pitted against that of the people's enemies. It was an attempt at recasting the exploiters' hegemonic consensus in order to allow the accommodation of middle-class interests to a greater degree, along with some heavy doses of populism for the bottommost classes. The form and function of the "rainbow coalition" was in fact yet another version of capitalism's accommodative political forms.

Chavizta policies kept the country vulnerable to the ups and downs of the world imperialist system. Its reformist politics and top-heavy forms of governance hampered the politicisation of the masses. These politics prevented it from relying on the masses by unleashing their revolutionary potential. Instead, instruments of the old state like the army and the Chavista's bureaucratic organisational forms were positioned as the main weapons to resist US imperialism and its lackeys. It thus compounded and aggravated the aftershocks of the global financial crisis and recession. The dire conditions in which Venezuela finds itself today underline the limits and errors of

Chavizmo. Similar to all other reformist ideologies and practices, it promised only to default. Its projection as the "socialism of the 21st century" has proven to be false. Contemporary socialism must continue to base itself on the advances and lessons given by the erstwhile socialist societies.

That is not to say that the Chavizta project has nothing more to offer, by way of its negative example other than a reaffirmation of the relevance of Marxism. Even if in a spontaneous and superficial manner, it brought to focus and reflected a new socio, political, cultural feature seen all over the world. A large number of social groups have become increasingly conscious about their oppressive existence. They are identifying the structures underlying it and forces perpetrating it. They have taken to the path of struggle. On their own, in alliance with others, employing forms ranging from the passive to the violently militant, then floundering in confusion, now pushing ahead in vigorous confidence, perhaps ebbing here but in full-flow over there, a broad array is out there, a "rainbow of forces" if you so wish to name it, fighting for their causes.

The various factors that have gone into its making, its origins, and trajectories—all of this would make an absorbing topic. But for now I focus on the present. What does this imply for the communist project? Proponents of the "rainbow coalition" thesis would argue that it has made both the political purpose and organisational forms of the communist project redundant. They accuse the communists of having suppressed diverse social interests in the name of the primacy of some overarching "proletarian interests." Moreover, the growing self-awareness and mobilisation of various social groups rules out any role for an external agency like a communist party conscientising and organising them.

"Proletarian interests" is presented in these accusations as something sectional. This is not how Marxism views it. Marx and Engels pointed out that the proletariat can achieve its liberation only through the emancipation of all humanity. This is the essence of "proletarian interests." To be true to it, the proletariat's struggle

for liberation must necessarily address all forms of domination and exploitation. That is why proletarian interests are claimed to be overarching. The communist society it wishes to build can only emerge from an endeavour imbued with this vision of all-round emancipation. Marx characterised that society as the ending of *all* exploitation and oppression, the uprooting of *all* relations and social structures on which they stood and the elimination of *all* thinking and consciousness they have given rise to.

The realisation of this all-embracing emancipatory potential is not something pre-assured or easily obtained. The class struggle of the proletariat acquires this quality to the extent it addresses the emancipatory concerns of all oppressed, exploited sections of society. This is the class struggle that is to be made principle. Obviously, the self-conscientisation of any or all oppressed sections of society would only aid this. The sooner all the exploited, oppressed, take up struggle, the better it would be to realise the all-embracing emancipatory potential of proletarian-led class struggle. At the very least, it would serve to expose and correct any sectarian, self-centred grasp of what proletarian interests are all about. A genuine communist party can never consider itself a "saviour." It cannot conceive of itself as some sort of sole agency in the business of dispensing emancipation.

So far as the organisational aspect is considered, there is nothing in the communist project demanding that each and every mobilisation or organisation of the masses should necessarily be led or carried out by a communist party. Yes, we surely do see experiences similar to this in the past. They were the products of existing social conditions. In many countries, especially in most of the oppressed ones, the communists were pioneers in making the masses conscious and organising them into struggle. A good example of such work and the comprehensive guidance given by Lenin on this task were seen in the activities of Bolsheviks in pre-revolutionary Russia. That became the main reference for the Third International in systematising organisational tasks and methods of work among the masses. Not just successful revolutions, the numerous struggles of the masses

led by communist parties all over the world and their gains testified to the usefulness of this model. The role such activities have played in enabling broad conscientisation and opening up ground for the self-awareness and organisation widely seen at present is undeniable. Yet, there is also the fact that these organisations far outnumber those led by communist parties today. The struggles they have waged on their own or in alliance with each other have been quite significant in their breadth and intensity. How should communist parties view this?

Two types of responses are usually seen. One of them stamps almost all of these organisations and their struggles as creations of imperialism and reaction. Their real purpose is declared to be that of confusing the masses, keeping them trapped in reformism, alienated from genuine revolutionary forces. The fact that many of them are built and led by foreign or corporate-funded NGOs is taken as further proof. Much of this is true. The active role played by the CIA and similar agencies in promoting these organisations and the theories they propound is now documented.[1] But that still doesn't answer a vital question. How are we to understand the widespread self-awareness now seen among the oppressed? What does it signify? To deny the self-agency seen here, to portray it too as an implant of imperialism, would be doing a grave injustice to the masses.

The second type of response distinguishes itself with its acceptance of this self-awareness as a positive development. It is hence self-critical. The errors committed by the communists in grasping and handling the issues of various sections of society like women, *Dalits*, *Adivasis* and so on, are accepted. Those errors are seen as a major factor underlying the distancing of these social groups from the communist parties. Their working out of new theorisation (often critical of Marxism) and independent organising are seen as responses to the failures of the communists in this regard. However, despite the self-analysis and recognition of a new social reality seen

[1] "The CIA Reads French Theory: On the Intellectual Labour of Dismantling the Cultural Left." https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/the-cia-reads-french-theory-on-the-intellectual-labour-of-dismantling-the-cultural-left/

here, this view still remains within the earlier frame. It believes that the task before the communist parties is to correct their earlier error and regain lost ground. It still holds to the view that, as far as possible, each and every section of the masses should be organised and led by the communists themselves. Evidently, its appreciation of the new social scene is still quite restricted.

Errors in theory and practice, committed by the communist parties while handling various social issues, have no doubt contributed in a negative manner to shaping these conditions. But, far more than that, awareness has been growing among the masses about their dire conditions, the forces and structures perpetrating it. This is principle. This is what has propelled them into struggle, to form organisations, to sustain their activities. The communists must grasp this important, qualitative development. They must factor it into their activities in all fields. The dynamic interplay between this outflow of mass awareness and action and the communist project must be identified and correctly handled. That is the demand placed by these times before any genuine vanguard. Mao Zedong made a deeply perceptive observation in the post-World War Two context. He pointed out that imperialism has created the material and moral foundations for its destruction. The immense growth of self-awareness among the masses and the struggles that we see around us, with all its ebbs and flows, is one representation of this qualitatively new feature of the world situation.

So how can the communist parties fulfil their vanguard role in this situation? They will certainly have to continue organising various sections of the oppressed and mobilise them into struggle. They must continue to draw them into the overall radical endeavour to root out the basic structures of exploitation and oppression. Along with that they have to better master the science and art of working along with a wide variety of forces, including those with negative attitudes towards the communist project.

Admittedly, this is not entirely new. Communist parties have long since been involved in such practices. What is new is the carry-

ing out of this task in the changed situation with its favourable and unfavourable factors. The favourable aspect is the heightened awareness and willingness to enter into struggle seen among the masses. The unfavourable one is the strengthening of reformism that keeps them within the narrow frames of specific sectional demands. Consequently, it goes to promote sectarianism. However, so long as the masses are in struggle, its very dynamics go to create grounds for overcoming sectarian attitudes and bringing all genuine pro-people forces together. A vanguard should keep this potential in mind and pursue policies that enable its realisation.

The heightened awareness of the masses also "divides into two." Take, for example, the identity consciousness of an oppressed social group. It is this that brings it into struggle, by becoming aware of the specific discrimination and oppression it suffers from. There is another side too. That identity itself has been formed, structured and sustained by those very relations they confront. Therefore, to the extent the struggle remains within the frame of identity consciousness, it ultimately keeps it within the bounds of the oppressive social system. This is the reformist core inevitable to every identity politics. While engaging in ideological struggle with the identity politics seen among oppressed sections of society, a proletarian vanguard should unite with their opposition, seen in that politics, to the existing system and the struggles brought forth by them.

United activities and united front have always been important components of communist activity. They acquire added significance in present conditions. All along accepted as a key component of the strategic vision in oppressed countries, the united front has acquired strategic significance in imperialist countries too. Furthermore, in both types of countries, its significant role will extend into post-revolutionary society, all the way through.

To be successful in united front activities, a vanguard should retain its independence and initiative. It should also guard against sectarianism. A vanguard should be adept at seeking out points of unity with various struggling forces and articulating policies

and demands addressing them. The present situation demands a further fine tuning of the struggle against sectarianism. Organisations grounded among one or the other social group, yet hostile to the communist project, are not at all uncommon today. Firmly grasping the significance of growing self-awareness and struggle of the oppressed, a communist party must differentiate between the objective role played by such forces and the views they express. To the extent they truly stand with the people in struggle, objectively they are part of the broad stream of forces contributing to the cause of radical change. Keeping this in mind, a vanguard should handle criticism made against it by such forces, even harsh ones, in a non-antagonistic manner, replying with prudent reasoning; just and restrained. It is the duty of a vanguard to unite the masses to bring together all streams of opposition into a mighty torrent.

United front activities must be led in such a manner that it enhances the consciousness of those composing it, including that of the communist party and the masses it directly leads. Therefore, the aim should be to win over the maximum number of forces to the highest level of unity possible at a specific juncture. This demands continuous effort to gain knowledge of the specific conditions and issues faced by diverse social sections and trends of thinking current among them. It calls for sustained application of the mass line, "from the masses, to the masses," and firm grasp of the principle "the masses are the real creators of history."

Sectarianism in united front activity emerges from various tendencies. One of them is rooted in the wrong understanding of leadership. The sectarian outlook views this as a matter of getting demands, positions, slogans advanced by the party accepted somehow or the other. This reflects a failure to apply mass line in leadership. It hampers united activities and ultimately weakens the vanguard's leading role. Another manifestation of sectarianism is seen in the instrumentalist approach which proposes: "form united fronts where the party is weak, go ahead on one's own where it is strong." The crux of united front activity, its organic link to the mass line,

is missed in this view. This error comes from a top down, elitist approach in grasping and handling the relation between a vanguard and the broad masses. It further bolsters this attitude, causing great harm. In the context of wider self-awareness among the masses, the negative fallout of sectarian tendencies on the part of a communist party will be doubly amplified.

To strengthen their guard against such errors the communists must thoroughly rid themselves of any idealist understanding of the communist party and its vanguard role. A communist party does not become a vanguard just by the act of its formation. There is a continuous process of its becoming one. Its vanguard role is something to be worked towards. It is a quality and acceptance it has to acquire and retain through its political leadership, theoretical work and radical practice. Furthermore, even when a communist party carries out its vanguard role successfully, that does not make it the sole or final arbiter of knowledge. Knowledge is being generated continuously, at diverse levels, all over the world. Therefore a communist party should be ever alert to the possibility that its understanding on some issue may be wrong or outdated. If that is not made a part of its awareness, an attitude of considering the party or leadership to be above errors will get entrenched. Conscious, critical grasp will be increasingly replaced by blind faith and the dogmatic assertion of "my party, right or wrong."

All of this will have added significance in a new born socialist society. The state in socialism is of a particular type. It has to simultaneously promote conditions for its eventual withering away, even while it carries out all the functions of governance. In this condition the communist party must have an institutionalised role in the state. It is necessary in order to retain the hegemony and continuity of proletarian class interests. This special, unchallengeable position of the party always carries the danger of its getting atrophied, of getting alienated from the masses and lording over them. The deviations mentioned earlier can easily get compounded if they are not struggled against consistently. Basing themselves on the advances made

through the Cultural Revolution, the communist parties must further develop structures and methods, allowing the supervision over the party by the masses. Their guidance must be the observation made by Mao Zedong that there is nothing wrong in the "masses teaching a lesson to the communist party."

The role of diverse organisations functioning independent of the communist party, of the united front led by it, in a future socialist society needs to be situated in this context. They can and should play an active role in the political, social life of that society, as part of the mass supervision over the communist party. Though being part of the broad category of "mass" some of the classes and strata within it could go over to the camp of imperialism and reaction, particularly in times of economic stress and political flux. The threat of organisations based among them becoming centres of counter-revolution will be ever present. This will at times call for closer supervision over them or even curbing of some freedoms. But, as Mao advocated, the overall policy should be one of "opening out." In the long run, the positive gain of consistent united front policy and a vibrant political culture will far outweigh the dangers this would pose at times.

Along with the elimination of class, the emergence of a qualitatively new social consciousness would be an essential constituent of the transition to communism. Yet, it would still not be the case that each and every individual will have become a communist. More likely than not, various social organisations will remain or newly emerge, reflecting divergences in interests and inclinations, engaged in non-antagonistic contention. Meanwhile the communist party itself would have fulfilled its vanguard role by creating conditions that would make it redundant and allow the "rainbow" to really shine.



The Working of the Neo-Colonial Mind

"That the 1991 reforms marked a major watershed in India's economic history is surely beyond argument. No waiting list for cars and scooters, no special license for securing foreign exchange for studying abroad, no gold smuggling and no more the dread of customs officers at the airports."

"The world has changed substantially since the 1990s and so has India. The country is now carving a niche in the global markets which has so far been dominated by developed countries."

These quotes were taken from issues of the *Economic and Political Weekly* (EPW).[1] The consumerist glee seen in the first is of someone wholly supportive of the neoliberal turn taken by the Indian State in 1991. Rajeev Kumar (presently the vice-chair of the NITI)[2] had some concerns about the inequality that accompanied it. Still, he believed that this could be handled and resolved, continuing with a neoliberal agenda adjusted to India. Greater integration with the world economy was declared as a "major achievement." Above all, he was quite certain that the reforms had a very large dose of indigenous inputs. He claims that they were based on domestic research and advocacy.

The second quote is from someone addressing a very different concern. Ramdas Rupvath was writing about the discrimination

[1] "Making Reform Work for the People," Rajiv Kumar; *EPW*, Vol 51, No: 19 and "Confronting Everyday Humiliation: Response from an Adivasi," Ramdas Rupvath, *EPW*, Vol 51, No: 31.

[2] The NITI (National Institution for Transforming India) is a policy think tank of the Government of India.

and humiliation suffered by *Dalit* and *Adivasi* students in institutes of higher education. Well aware of the social, economic roots of the prejudices they are victims of, he squarely targeted the *varna*/caste system as anti-social and anti-national. He also pointed out that opportunities became even more unequal and uncertain post-liberalisation. The fruits of its growth went to a tiny rich class.

Coming from distinctly different spaces, Kumar and Rupavath articulate sharply different concerns. Yet, as seen in these quotes, both are convinced about one thing—India has "arrived" on the world stage. Indeed, this is a dominant theme among a great majority of the middle class. And that includes many otherwise critical of the state of affairs in the country. It is almost an article of faith, an unquestionable frame of reference. It was also the overriding theme of most of the articles published in newspapers and magazines marking the 25th anniversary of the 1991 reforms. Many of them made it a point to deny any foreign compulsion and insisted on their indigenous origins.

Montek Singh Ahluwalia's article is symptomatic of this viewpoint. Refuting allegations that these reforms were imposed by the IMF, he writes:

> This completely ignores the fact that there was a home-grown process of rethinking on economic policy that had been underway and pointed towards many changes. These changes certainly formed part of the conditionality of the IMF's assistance, because the IMF's supposed to lend only in situations where the government has a credible adjustment programme. The IMF obviously approved the reforms in that sense, but that is not the same thing as saying it dictated the contents.[3]

He then goes on to enumerate various proposals and initiatives, beginning from the late 1970s onwards, aimed at changing economic policy. They culminated in a paper he authored in 1990.

[3] "The 1990s Reforms: How Home Grown Were They?" EPW, Vol 51, No 29, p 39.

Its contents mostly anticipated the reforms of 1991. Ahluwalia cites the discussion of this paper in a Government of India (GOI) Committee of Secretaries as proof of these proposals "…being considered internally, well before any IMF arrangements was contemplated."

We need not dispute this account given by a leading architect of the 1990 reforms. But does it really settle the matter? Can the mere fact of a policy paper being discussed by some GOI Secretaries, or the policy shift carried out since the 1990s, determine that the reforms were of internal origin? Ahluwalia supplies the answer in his unwitting admission: the policy changes proposed by the Narasimha Rao Government were precisely those that formed the conditionalities of the IMF loan. They were directed towards ensuring structural adjustments suited to the neo-liberal agenda. They were not advisory in nature. A country seeking IMF assistance could not amend or reject them. They were inviolable—an imposition. That is the crux of the matter. It stands confirmed by the fact that almost all Third World countries had to adopt similar policy shifts during that period.[4]

An imposition need not take the form of an explicit diktat. It could well be achieved through the loan seeking government pre-indicating willingness to fulfil IMF conditions. Considering that the prior acceptance of a structural adjustment program was a must, it would make eminent sense for a desperate government to declare its compliance well in advance. Keep in mind that while the "balance of payment" crisis was brought to quick maturation by the first Gulf War, the motion towards it was already evident by the late 1980s. Therefore, the fact that the policy shift was proposed and debated upon even before approaching the IMF really doesn't prove Ahluwalia's claim.

The collapse of the Soviet Union had a direct impact on the Indian economy. It severely weakened the Indian ruling class. They had to fall in line with the "Washington Consensus" and accept the

[4] Between 1982 and 1990 the number of "upper tranche" loans with at least 11 conditionalities grew from 5 to 60%. WB structural adjustment loans went up from 3 to 25% in 1981-1996. (*EPW* Volume 52, no 33, note 6 on p 92.)

neoliberal "globalisation, privatisation and liberalisation" (GPL) agenda promoted by the US, now the sole superpower. Whether as an IMF conditionality or not, structural adjustments to give free play to neoliberal policies were inevitable. Later, structural adjustments incorporating the GPL agenda, became a permanent, inviolable condition, an inseparable part of the Indian economy (and of other Third World economies) through the 1993 GATT Agreement and the World Trade Organization's (WTO) directives.

All of this is long since public knowledge. Why do Ahluwalia and Kumar then persist in insisting on the "domestic pedigree" of the 1991 reforms? Theirs is not an attempt at covering up. No, they wholeheartedly believe that, in full view of the facts. And that makes it worth probing further.

What immediately strikes one is the blurring of the distinction between the internal and external. There has been a continuous exchange of technocrats and academicians between the GOI (and various Indian institutions) and imperialist agencies like the World Bank, IMF and Asian Development Bank (ADB). This became particularly noticeable from the 1980s onwards. Manmohan Singh, Ahluwalia himself, Raghuram Rajan, Arvind Subramanian and Arvind Panagariya and Urjit Patel—these are some of the recent examples.

Those who serve at the IMF and similar agencies are inevitably conditioned by the current set of ideas or policy framework being prescribed by them. When these technocrats came back to occupy key positions in GOI and articulate policy, they are invariably guided, inspired by the thinking they had imbibed and argued for while working in those imperialist agencies. Kumar's claim about the "Indian origin" of the reforms brings this out very well. His justification is that researchers "well versed in the Indian ground realities"[5] had presented reform measures in a "readily comprehensible form" to the political leadership and other policy makers well before the formal acceptance of IMF conditionalities. Kumar added a note to his article to prove this. It informs us about a study prepared by

[5] Rajeev Kumar, op. cit, p 35

a team, including himself, for the ADB in 1989. In his words, "It is noteworthy that many of these measures [i.e. those proposed in the study] were replicated in the structural reforms matrix presented by the IMF…" as conditionality for its loan.

There is nothing surprising about this "replication." After all the ADB is a key player among imperialist agencies. Going by the information Kumar provides, there is also nothing surprising about his considering an external, foreign, set of ideas as "internally" generated. For people like him and Ahluwalia this only appears as a seamless flow of ideas, which they share and willingly act upon. For them there is nothing separating the indigenous from the foreign in this matter.

This approach is by no means restricted to IMF-WB returnees. A great many academicians and all top-level administrators are tutored or directly trained in imperialist thinking. Quite naturally enough, the contribution they make to governance and economic policies remains within the framework of imperialist thought. Nothing is imposed. The external is internalised. Its articulation becomes country specific without even a trace of its foreign origins.

Whether they be foreign returnees or home-based ones, consideration of the Indian economy as one enmeshed (not integrated) in the global imperialist system is simply missing. This stands in sharp contrast to the thinking of the local elites during the colonial period. They could not but be acutely aware of British India's dependent status and its debilitating consequences. The British origins and biases of policies executed by the colonial administration were all too plain. Hence, even while remaining loyal subjects of the British empire, some among them produced weighty studies exposing the plunder of the imperial metropolis and expressing local interests in opposition to metropolitan capital.

The transfer of power in 1947 promoted a transition from this mindset to a new one. To get an idea of this transformation and the characteristics of the new consciousness, we must first get acquainted with the colonial mind, the mind of the elite colonial subject. Awe-

struck by the political and economic might of the colonial power and grieving one's own backwardness—such was its main character. The local elites were eager to imitate the colonial masters in all public spheres of their lives. The metropolis was acclaimed as the model to aspire to. Yet, the colonial mind was also quite disgruntled. Even the richest, even those with royal lineage or those who had demonstrated academic acumen were still treated as inferior "locals" by colonial masters. They remained lesser subjects compared to those in colonies populated by "whites." They were denied dominion status. Dissatisfaction engendered by such discrimination, coupled with the drain of wealth, crystallised over time into political opposition expressed as anti-colonialism. The Indian National Congress was its main articulator and vehicle.

For the new rulers who came to power in 1947 and their ideologues, independence was nothing more than the ending of colonial rule. Hence they sincerely believed that they were engaged in building an independent country. This was not simply a false image meant to deceive the people. They were quite convinced about its feasibility. By 1947 an elite intellectual stratum had taken form. It was composed of elements from the comprador, feudal and upper middle classes. They became the formulators and executors of economic measures adopted by the new state. A good many were driven by a zeal to build an India capable of taking a prominent role in the world arena. Brahmanist claims about a glorious past and a desire to "retake" it were intertwined with their ambitions. Getting rid of economic backwardness was their priority. But their very class nature ruled out radical reforms in agriculture and other spheres. Considering the building of an industrial base as a necessary condition and constrained by paucity of capital and technology, they eagerly sought "foreign aid."

Initially, some imperialist powers like the US were opposed to their plans. The new rulers succeeded in crossing this obstacle by relying on other powers. The whole experience and similar instances in other fields went to further strengthen the illusion of indepen-

dence. Sharp contradictions between the capitalist bloc and the erstwhile socialist camp and later between the two superpower blocs (led by US and the erstwhile Soviet Social Imperialism) allowed room for their manoeuvring and bargaining.

The uppermost strata were well aware of India's actual dependent position in the world order. Their immediate dealings with the world powers repeatedly underlined this real status, especially during recurring crisis. But it was realised as limits on their independence, not as limitations inherent to it. The middle class, distant from such experiences, was however firmly convinced of India's "importance" in world affairs as an independent country. It was quite taken in by ruling class hype. Such are the main characteristics of the neo-colonial mind in India. It mainly manifests as a sense of independence, even while the country remains dependent.

Formal independence of erstwhile colonies is an essential feature, a vital requirement of neo-colonialism. That distinguishes it from colonialism. Instead of direct control exercised in the political sphere under colonialism, indirect control becomes the norm. This emerges from the very trajectory, the origins and evolution of neo-colonialism. Principally, it did not come from the internal economic dynamism of imperialism. Rather, it was a political response, something forced on it by the tide of anti-colonial and national liberation struggles. In countries like China this high tide was expressed as a revolution challenging the imperialist order. For imperialism, the success of the new global architecture hinged on the degree to which the tide of revolt could be turned back. The semblance of independence in former colonies thus became crucial for the emerging neo-colonial world order. The imperialist powers had to concede this, even if grudgingly.

Even then they tried to retain their direct control in the economic sphere. This was true of the US too, which was promoting "decolonisation" as a stratagem to weaken major colonial powers like Britain and France. Wherever possible, imperialism tried to prevent any development that would weaken its direct economic

grip. It sought to retain existing forms of exploitation and plunder of oppressed nations. This impacted the interests of the new rulers in the neo-colonies. They were keen on building and strengthening their own base, in order to be in a better position to bargain. This tug of interests inevitably became a prominent aspect of the relations between imperialist powers and Third World ruling classes. The shift to indirect control of the economies of semi-feudal, semi-colonial countries under neo-colonialism took place over time. Primarily, it was enabled by the perfection of new means for imperialist penetration, such as tied aid, transfer of obsolete technology and conditional loans from imperialist agencies during periods of crisis.

The new ruling classes remained subservient to imperialism as a whole. Yet, the legitimacy of their rule, their ideological hegemony, ultimately rested on the claim of heading an independent country. Wherever the communists or other revolutionary forces succeeded in gaining leadership of the struggle against the colonial power, they took it forward as a broad anti-imperialist, anti-feudal struggle. This forced the compradors and feudal classes in those countries to increasingly reveal their true nature as servitors of imperialism. In situations where revolutionary forces failed to gain leadership and power was transferred to the exploiting classes, they presented themselves as champions of independence. Having cornered the leadership of the struggle during the colonial period, they could conceal their nature and appear as genuine leaders of a quest to consolidate independence and achieve development. This appeared as a continuation of their leading role in the anti-colonial struggle.

The bolstering and perfecting of the semblance of independence in both the political and economic realms was vital for the new ruling classes. The backing away of imperialism from retaining direct control over neo-colonial economies and the fleshing out of neo-colonialism, was however mainly realised as responses to struggles of the masses—that is, through the working out of the contradiction between imperialism and oppressed nations and people. Though the contradictions between Third World ruling classes and imperialist

powers also had a role in this, it was secondary. These remained essentially non-antagonistic within the imperialist system. The opposition expressed by any Third World state was always with one or the other imperialist power or bloc. It was never against the imperialist system as such. The limits of anti-colonial struggle, a struggle that had equated independence to the ending of colonial rule, was thus revealed. For the comprador and feudal classes, that limit was inherent in their class character. But for the classes that rallied under their leadership and thus failed to go beyond anti-colonialism, it was an unconscious internalisation of comprador thought. It was also a process through which they were co-opted into the hegemonic consensus being forged by the rulers-to-be. They remained trapped in a false consciousness that presented dependence as independence.

Those lacking in a consistent anti-imperialist stand inevitably failed to break away from imperialist thinking. That frame of thought and the policies it generated appeared to them as value-free universal principles. Imperialism's active role in shaping and influencing the academic world of neo-colonies complemented and strengthened the disguised subservience it spawned. Hence, for the neo-colonial mind, measures of imperialist control and exploitation are never seen as external impositions. They are considered as arising from the internal dynamics of the country, necessitated by its development quest. The neo-colonial mind is blind to the imperialist system in which the country is enmeshed. With their vision blocked from seeing the real world by the false consciousness of independence and its articulation as narrow nationalism, the neo-colonial intellectual/technocrat proposes and pursues policies that heighten imperialism's grip ever more; all the while believing that they will strengthen the country. Participation in neo-colonial bodies like the IMF, WB, G-20 and so on is seen as a matter of self-willed choice and recognition of one's country's standing.

It is not the case that the neo-colonial subjects have no contradiction with imperialism. We earlier saw the differentiation within this. There is the antagonistic contradiction the oppressed people

have with the imperialist system. And there are also the non-antagonistic contradictions Third World ruling classes have with this or that imperialist power. Consequently, the manner in which these contradictions are grasped varies. For the ruling classes, bred and shaped by imperialism, this is a matter of bargaining. That is not how it is experienced by other classes such as the national bourgeoisie, middle class, peasantry and workers. Yet, to the extent they are under the sway of ruling-class hegemonic consensus, the neo-colonial mind dominates. Apparent similarity is seen between their understanding of the country's position in the world, world events and that of the ruling classes. The difference lies in their patriotism as opposed to the compradorism of the rulers. However, that patriotism fails in its subjective desire to be independent when it remains trapped in the neo-colonial frame of thought. In the final analysis it ends up strengthening the ruling class's hegemonic consensus and dependence on the imperialist system. This is true even when it is expressed in the form of militant nationalism.

An instance of this dynamism that readily comes to mind is the Indira Gandhi government's stand-off with the US in 1971 on the Bangladesh issue. Despite facing threatening moves by the US, the Indian government stuck to its plan to intervene in the Bangladesh liberation war and ensure the break-up of Pakistan. The ruling classes celebrated it as proof of India's independent foreign policy and standing in the world. This stance and India's victory in the 1971 war were hailed by the broad masses with great fervour. In the midst of this what went unnoticed was the backing given by the erstwhile Soviet social imperialism and its tightening grip through the Indo-Soviet Treaty. Thus the patriotism of the masses became a means of legitimising greater subservience to social imperialism and, through it, to the imperialist system as a whole.

Having noted some of the salient features of the neo-colonial mind, we shall now return to the matter of the 1991 policy shift. The occasion of the 25th anniversary has been used by some intellectuals to grieve the years "lost" preceding that shift. A rather sim-

plistic lesson is drawn by comparing the rapid growth of South East Asian countries in that period with the slow pace seen in India. It is argued that these countries "succeeded" because they had opened up to foreign capital quite early and boosted exports. India, on the contrary, remained a closed economy insisting on "import substitution." Note that the position of these countries in the post-World War 2 political and economic architecture of the imperialist system simply does not figure in this argument. When that is taken into consideration, the key role played by the strategic moves of the US in their growth would stand out.

The importance given by the US to these countries was closely related to its strategy of containing the impact of Socialist China and growing national liberation struggles. The Vietnam War, pitting a communist-led people's war against the US and allies, soon turned into a focal point. Countries like Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan and South Korea became even more important for the US. This was the global context enabling and shaping the economies of these countries through "export-led growth." Yet, for all that, they remained links in the imperialist value-commodity chain, as component suppliers to transnational corporates. In recent decades, a few monopolies from these countries have emerged as significant players in consumer goods production. But then, so too have Indian corporates. Besides, import substitution was by no means unique to India. In its heyday, it was standard policy in a number of Third World countries, particularly the bigger ones. Their common inspiration was a neo-colonial development model then favoured by some imperialist circles. It was seen as a means to deepen imperialist penetration through project-tied loans and limited export of obsolete technology. Whether "export-led" or "import-substituted" they ultimately contributed to a strengthening of dependence. The Indian neo-colonial mind is bitter about having been denied the opportunity to indulge in consumerist orgies along with its fellows in South East Asian countries. In doing so it blinds itself to the hollowness of those economies, sharply exposed in the crisis that hit them in the

late 1990s. Big corporates like Daewoo simply collapsed. A huge chunk of locally owned industrial assets was snatched up for a trifle by imperialist corporates. Their dependence on imperialism stood out in all its ugliness.

Incidentally, the Indian economy escaped the worst of the 2007 global financial crisis precisely because it had not yet opened up to full capital convertibility. This was something the IMF and local technocrats had insistently demanded. But, just around the time the clamour to fully open up capital markets reached a high pitch, the South East Asian "Tigers" started collapsing. Given their "openness" they were unable to control capital flight. It was this turn, rather than the prudence of this or that RBI Governor, that delayed full capital convertibility. And that turned out to be quite beneficial when the 2007 crisis hit the world.

The neo-colonial mind is still stuck in a time warp lamenting the slow pace of "opening up." Meanwhile, an influential and growing section in imperialist ruling circles and its agencies have moved on. Full capital convertibility is seen by them as a major risk. It is no longer advised. The sharp rise in inequality following implementation of GPL policies is recognised as a serious destabilising factor. The neo-liberal policy set is being amended. A trend arguing for this had emerged by the late 1990s and early 2000 with calls for "globalisation with a human face" and "inclusive government." What is significant is the broader respectability this has gained over the years in the IMF-WB officialdom and its promotion through their official journals.[6] Even then, the main thrust of the neo-liberal agenda still retains its venomous bite. Conditions imposed on Greece for a bail-out loan are a sharp reminder.

The slowdown of reforms during the UPA rule and attempts to "revive" it under the NDA-2 has been a prominent theme in neo-colonial academic political circles. There certainly was a "slowdown." Objective factors underlay it. By the late 1990s and early years of

[6] "IMF's Auto critique of neo-liberalism?," Pritam Singh, *EPW*, Vol: 51, No 32. An article in the IMF's official magazine has admitted that "the claim that neo-liberalism always contributed to economic growth is difficult to sustain." (p 39)

2000s, broad mass struggle broke out in many parts of the country. They were mainly focused on the forced displacement of peasants and *Adivasis* from their lands for the sake of multinational-Indian corporate projects and Special Economic Zones. The ruling classes had to take this into account, particularly because they aided the growth and spread of the Maoist movement in some regions. Taking a cue from imperialist circles, and lessons from the miserable defeat of NDA-I in 2004, the UPA started parroting "globalisation with a human face." It initiated reformist programs like MNREGA and adopted new acts meant to blunt struggles from below. The aggressive promotion of GPL was held back to some extent.

As usual, the neo-colonial mind grasps this as its own product. The conclusion that "India is not suited to the application of the Washington Consensus" is presented as original thought "emerging from Indian reality."[7] Imperialist finance capital is renamed by some as "global capital." Defying all indicators of deepening dependency, it is even claimed that global capitalism "has been created" within India![8]

It is not that those who state such views are unaware of policy rethinking taking place in imperialist circles. They consider this merely an enabling factor. The real impetus, in their view, comes from internal developments. Imperialist agencies certainly do not produce policies purely from their own thought or conditions. Political, social and economic developments in Third World countries are under their constant observation. Sensing the mood of the broad masses is an important part of this. Comprador rulers and intellectuals are vital sources in this process; there is continuous interaction with them. But, ultimately, policy is set at the global level by imperialist think tanks and agencies serving finance capital. The comprador, the neo-colonial mind, won't experience this as an external input. After all, they too have been part of its evolution. Yet they still are not the deciding factor for the formulation of policy. This is

[7] Kumar, op cit, p 55.
[8] "Indian Economy in Transition," Anjan Chakrabarti, *EPW*, Vol 51, No: 29, p 64.

the crux, however incomprehensible it is to the neo-colonial mind.

Let us go back to the "slowdown-revival" theme posed and debated in neo-colonial circles. One notes a near total absence of any reference to the 2007 global crisis and the long drawn out global recession it caused. If we are to really understand what happened and is happening in our economy, this must be factored in. In the initial years of the crisis China and India (and a few other Third World countries) were able to maintain their growth and remained stable. Restrictions on capital convertibility played a major role in this. The relative stability of these economies was an important factor aiding the imperialist powers to ride out the worst years of the crisis. However, given the enmeshing of these economies in the imperialist system this could not be sustained for long. By 2010/11 the continuing recession in imperialist countries started impacting them. Furthermore, the UPA-2 got caught up in the uncertainties of its coalition politics.

A stable government that could vigorously push the GPL agenda became a pressing necessity. This underlay the all-out backing given to Modi and the BJP led NDA by the ruling classes and imperialists. The payback is now appearing as a stepped-up effort to carry out GPL. It is not just a matter of economic policies. Concerted efforts to stifle democratic protest through deploying the fascist hordes of the Sangh Parivar, the attempt to disarm the masses by fanning up narrow nationalism and a massive increase in para-military deployment in areas of struggle are all part of this step-up.

Despite all this and the haste to attract foreign capital, growth rates have kept on falling. Banking is in a mess. Fresh local investment is stagnant. Demonetisation and GST have further worsened things. The biggest chunk of India's industry is in the unorganised medium, small and tiny sectors. They are suffering the most, along with the rural economy. The Modi government seeks the answer in a more desperate effort to attract foreign capital. Every instance of foreign capital coming in, even if it is mainly portfolio investment in the share, debt markets, is hailed as proof of the Indian economy's

strength and confidence in the present ruling dispensation.

Finance capital is flowing in, no doubt. It seeks profits from differences in interest rates by borrowing at low or zero rates in imperialist countries and investing it here to take advantage of the higher rates existing in India. The recession in imperialist countries also leads finance capital to seize profitable investment opportunities in countries like India that still retain some buoyancy. Thus, a few sectors like urban transportation have seen fresh foreign investment. We can see this in the race for metro networks, even in cities that still don't have proper roads. Huge amounts of finance capital, in the form of loans, are flowing in to fund these projects. They give recession-stricken rail industries in imperialist countries some reprieve. The "smart cities" project is another example of opening up new avenues for profit-seeking finance capital. It is predicated on a wholesale privatisation of municipal services.

Control over finance capital is the key lever in the global imperialist system. According to a study by a research group in Switzerland, just 20 imperialist transnational financial corporates control almost all the big corporates in the world. No matter how many companies the Tatas or Ambanis buy up in imperialist countries, even if more than half of their income originates in global operations, they remain comprador midgets before these giants. The composition of India's relatively higher growth rate is itself reflective of the country's true status. It is mainly consumption driven. Industrial production does not contribute even one third.

Ramadas Rupavath has plainly gotten his facts wrong. Let alone "carving niches," India's performance in the "global marketplace" is still quite negligible. But, more than the factual error, what is most worrying is the shocking knowledge that even someone like Rupavath, who stands with the oppressed, is trapped in the discourse of the neo-colonial mind. We are forcefully reminded that an unapologetic, aggressive, anti-imperialism is by no means outdated. We need more of it, in higher doses.

(Written in October 2016 and updated in January 2018)

If Not Reservation, Then What?

The last two decades have seen many a struggle of *Savarna* youth in various states, demanding reservation. They stand in sharp contrast to the anti-reservation agitations of the 1980s and 1990s. The main force and leading sections of those movements were the very same castes, now demanding reservation. Then they were demanding the scrapping of caste-based reservation and its replacement with economic criteria. They insisted that prominence should be given to "merit." Currently, the demand is for inclusion in the reservation list—as castes. They are adamant on this, even if it calls for amending the 50 percent cut-off imposed by the Supreme Court. The anti-reservation agitations were mostly urban-centred. Today they are predominantly rural-based. How should we understand this total reversal of demands and shift of locus? What do its dynamics reveal?

Quite a few have commented on this. The gist of their reasoning is as follows. The plateauing of the Green Revolution and falling growth rates in agriculture form the backdrop. This was the underlying current of the 1980s agitations as well. But in that period the predominant impulse was that given by stagnant job opportunities. The initial stirring up that came with the "globalisation, privatisation, liberalisation" (GPL) agenda in the 1990s and growth in urban and rural employment markets had provided some relief. Soon enough this proved to be superficial. The promises of the GPL agenda turned out to be hollow. While government statistics faithfully recorded growth, year after year, it added very few new jobs. Even these were mainly low-paid and casual, mostly in the unor-

ganised sector. According to a 2014 Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report, data on 117 Special Economic Zones showed a whopping 93 percent gap between actual employment generated by them and the projections made at the time of their getting approval.[1]

Earlier, higher education was a largely reliable route to regular jobs and income. Rapid growth of private educational institutions and new courses led to a boom in educational opportunities. Several new careers have come up. But extremely high fees put them out of reach of the vast majority. All of these factors are greatly restricting avenues for the upward mobility of *Savarna* youth. Rural *Savarna* youth suffer the most. This makes reservation and its assurance of education and employment so important for them.

While all of these are valid they still remain restricted to proximate reasons. There is something more fundamental going on here. These agitations have mainly taken place in regions that saw good growth through the Green Revolution. Their agriculture is supposed to have become capitalist. Yet, caste being employed as the identifier for mobilisation, the demand for reservation being made as castes, indicates something else. The very nature of the transformations that have taken place need probing. What has changed, what remains unchanged in the rural economy and why? How do they relate to the current agitations of the *Savarna* youth?

Let us first go through some data. The share of the agricultural sector in the GDP has been steadily going down. It was 18.2 percent in 2013-14. Between 1999-2000 and 2011-12, employment in agriculture dropped from 23.83 *crores* to 23.13 *crores*. This sector is the only one that suffered negative growth in employment during this period. The rural sector, as a whole, still contributes 48 percent to the GDP.[2] But, by the first two decades of liberalisation, its asset to population share ratio has decreased by nearly one third as compared to an almost equal increase in the urban sector. Survey reports indicate that the major chunk of credit availed in rural areas is used

[1] *Indian Express*, August 20, 2015.
[2] Most of the data cited here was taken from various issues of the *Economic and Political Weekly*. A list of the articles referred to is given at the end.

for household needs. When coupled with the data on asset imbalance this reveals a fall in rural capital formation.

The bottommost strata of agrarian classes subsist on a combination of agricultural and non-agricultural wage labour and livestock rearing. This has been and remains the norm, rather than the typical capitalist trend where members of this class increasingly get transformed into industrial labour. Along with this, the shifting of people from agriculture is steadily increasing over the generations. Interestingly this too is modulated by caste. A difference of more than ten percentage points was seen between *Brahmins* and *Dalits* in this regard in UP. Despite all of this, cultivation remains the principle source of income for those with land holdings above one acre and its share increases in proportion to land size.

Decreasing returns, on top of its risky nature, make agriculture an unprofitable venture. Correspondingly, the social value of even large holdings and sizeable agricultural operations has also been steadily depreciating. The social downgrading of agriculture is well indicated by contemporary trends in the "marriage market." Until a few decades ago, substantial land holdings had premium value. Nowadays preference is given to grooms who have regular, non-agricultural jobs in a city. The "loss of face" of youth who are forced to return to their villages in the event of failing to gain decent employment in urban centres is yet another social indicator of the depreciation of the rural sector.

Non-farm jobs and migration have increased quite significantly. A Green Revolution (GR) region in Western UP reported in 1974/75 that 70 percent of its jobs were in the farm sector. By 2008-09 non-farm jobs accounted for 60 percent. The same is seen all over the country. Growth in non-farm jobs now outstrips that of those in the agricultural sector. The non-farm workforce went up to 38 percent in 2011-12 from 19.2 in 1993.

Most of these jobs are low-paid and casual, mainly in construction and services. Proximity to urban centres increases their availability. Where most male workers go to urban centres for work, agri-

cultural operations are mostly becoming a female occupation. The growth of non-farm jobs in both urban and semi-urban centres has led to seasonal labour scarcity in villages and an across the board rise in rural wages.

There has been a steady growth in "Census Towns" (CT), accelerating between 2001 and 2011. They accounted for nearly 80 percent of the urban population growth during this period. Any village reporting 4000 plus population, 400 per sq. km population density and with more than 75 percent main male workers in non-farm work in a Census Round is declared a CT in the next round. Though considered part of the urban, there is actually not much to distinguish a CT in the nature and quality of its infrastructure from the rural surrounding it. A Bihar study indicated social dynamics of caste, community and gender almost identical to the rural. Establishments in the CT were mostly of a subsistence type with scant potential for capital accumulation. It was observed that the only trade seen flourishing was that of private, informal money lending.

Out-state migration is, in some states, a major source of income for the bottommost section of society. In Bihar, more than half the income of households reporting migration came from remittances. While most of the migrant workers from *Savarna* and higher intermediate castes (OBC) are engaged in permanent, salaried jobs, the rest are mainly into casual work. Migration for work now counts in the *crores*. To give some idea, in-migration for Keralam alone was 2,35,000 per annum in 2013. Rough estimates put the total migrant labour present in the state at 30 *lakhs*, i.e. nearly one-tenth of its population.[3] For the country as whole, internal migration is estimated to have shot up by nearly 25 percent during 2007/08-2011. Increased non-farm employment and migration, with concomitant higher local wages, have pushed up household income at the bottommost levels of rural society. It has not, however, led to any immediate gain in productive assets. Most of the extra income is used for educating children and improving or constructing houses.

Despite the greater importance given to education across all

[3] *Indian Express*, August 15, 2016.

classes its utility has been much restricted by shrinking employment prospects. While 7 *lakhs* new jobs were added in 2011/12, it fell to 1.5 *lakhs* in 2014/15. Taking a longer span of time, 6 *crores* jobs were created during 1999-2004. This decreased by nearly two-thirds to 2.7 *crores* during 2004-10. The GPL's "jobless growth" agenda is starkly seen in these figures. Employment elasticity (growth in jobs for every point rise in GDP) has steadily gone down to 0.15 in 2016 from 0.39 in 1999-2000. Even sectors like the software industry that have accounted for a higher and growing share of permanent employment, are affected by "jobless growth." An estimate indicates that the number of employees needed to generate Rs. 6300 *crores* (at 2017 rates, roughly $1 billion) revenue in this sector has fallen by half in the last six years. Government and public sector employment also show a noticeable fall in numbers. At present 44 percent of government jobs are temporary.[4] The growing trend of automation promises an even more dismal scene in the years to come.

Access to education, employment and political positions have led to the emergence of tiny elites among the intermediate castes, *Dalits*, and in some States, *Adivasis*. Utilising these opportunities they have been able to improve their economic status. These strata are now buying up land and other assets. They are present in the local/State/Central political and administrative setup. To that extent, the means of domination and ascension are no longer exclusively in the hands of *Savarna* village elites. Thus, while *Savarna* domination still remains decisive in an overall sense, some sections of the oppressed castes have been able to take advantage of new opportunities. Their historically given position in the traditional caste order has played a crucial role in this.

For most of the oppressed castes, local or migrant subsistence non-farm employment is often accompanied by low-scale livestock rearing. It contributed almost one fourth to their household income. At the opposite end, for the landlords, rich peasants and a tiny section of middle peasants from the oppressor castes, diversification has led to their entry into profitable avenues like commission agencies,

[4] *Indian Express*, June24, 2016; *Times of India*, July 11, 2016.

trade in agricultural inputs, real estate agencies and small or medium entrepreneurship. By virtue of their socio-economic positions and political clout, they corner almost all government subsidies and gain the most from government schemes. They are well entrenched at all levels of the local administration. Caste/religious community networks spanning the whole State, closely intertwined with political affiliations, greatly enable them. Their ability to exert local domination is directly related to the links they have with the state apparatus through such networks. Control over local administrative bodies and co-operative societies helps them in strengthening and sustaining patronage webs in the villages. Violence, carried out with the silent support or even connivance of the local police, is employed to put down any challenge. A minuscule portion from among them has even succeeded in joining the ranks of the big bourgeoisie by depending on largesse garnered through political/governmental connections.

As noted earlier, peasants from the higher echelons of the intermediate castes are purchasing land. Most of it comes from upper castes selling off portions of their land to meet economic or social demands (such as marriage expenses). The upper strata of the intermediate castes have been quite active in adopting new technology. They even surpass *Savarna* castes in this regard. Their socio-economic elevation has also led to a greater degree of Brahmanisation among them. Quite often, they now appear as the direct oppressors of *Dalits*. With growing class differentiation, the cleavage among intermediate castes, formally acknowledged in the creation of a "Most Backward Class" category, has also become explicit.

Caste still determines the capability of different sections in moving into better paid and high-status jobs. But, regardless of caste, for the vast majority the trend has been one of impoverishment. A growing section of peasantry from *Savarna* and intermediate castes has been pushed down to the ranks of marginal peasantry and agricultural labour. Large numbers of regular workers from these castes employed in big industry have been thrown out of regular jobs and

reduced to casual workers as part of "downsizing" the labour force, an integral part of the GPL agenda. Meanwhile, *Dalits*, *Adivasis* and oppressed castes among religious minorities continue to form the bulk of the bottommost levels.

Caste relations are not as of old. *Dalits* are now able to lease in land on various terms of tenancy. Though forced to part with a large share of surplus, tenancy gives them a chance to improve their economic situation, subject to the fluctuating fortunes of agriculture. Fixed money rent is nowadays more common. Paying rent as a fixed share of surplus in cash or produce also remains significant, amounting to 40 percent of all lease terms. Another indication of changing caste structures is seen in the pattern of dwellings. Mixed caste neighbourhoods, particularly with *Dalits* residing as neighbours of *Savarna* or intermediate castes, are still extremely rare in rural areas. However, they do exist now. This was something unthinkable a few decades ago.[5]

Landlessness or land poverty of the great majority at one end and monopolisation of land by a tiny minority at the other remains predominant. Taking one acre as the minimum land size to generate some income, it is estimated that there has been a six percent point increase in effective landlessness in just ten years (2002-03 to 2012-13), and it has now reached 66.1 percent. While this figure is already quite alarming, it still doesn't capture the full dimensions of the matter. A one acre cut off would be totally inadequate for any meaningful farming in dry areas, which comprise most of the cultivable land. Even in irrigated areas with double cropping, the produce of one acre would hardly suffice for a minimum standard of living. Hence, we can safely conclude that effective landlessness is far more than the estimate seen above.

Though the weight of land ownership in defining economic and social status has depreciated, land still remains a prized asset. Access to this resource is still mainly determined by caste. This is

[5] This must be read together with the growing trend of caste and religious community-wise segregation in urban apartment complexes and gated communities.

equally true of "advanced" States like Punjab or Keralam, and "backward" ones like Bihar. An NSSO survey reports that 55 percent of land is controlled by ten percent *Savarnas*. To quote from a Madhya Pradesh village study:

> …[O]n an average upper and dominant castes appear as those still holding the bulk of Jamgod's land… (L)and is no longer the most important asset against which political and social life is structured… However, to understand who owns land and why remains central to understanding the operation of power in the village… We can see the enduring nature of caste inequality in relation to resources, occupations, migration and land fragmentation.[6]

So what is to be made out of all this? The rural scene has no doubt changed. Yet, the nature of this is such that in all spheres—political, economic, social and cultural—many of the previously existing relations have been reproduced and reinforced in new ways and forms.[7] This precisely is its uniqueness. Properly understood it will provide an initial basis for grasping the strange phenomena of those lauded as "progressive" farmers demanding reservation on a caste basis, reversing their earlier "anti-reservation" stance. It is not the case that they are "returning" to caste. No, that has been a crucial aspect of their social, economic, cultural and political lives all along. Their earlier opposition to caste-based reservation was just as much casteist as is their present demand.

An all-India evaluation of data obtained from a 2013 NSSO survey on agricultural households reveals how land ownership, tenancy conditions, agricultural infrastructure, credit sources and burden, and productivity still vary across castes quite significantly. The persistence of caste, its reproduction and reinforcement is of course all too visible in the all-round, continuing deprivation of *Dalits* and

[6] "Land, Labour and Power, A Malwa Village: 1954-2012," Tommaso Sbricoli, *EPW*, No: 26-27, p.12.

[7] A striking example of the reproduction of caste-feudal values is the regression seen in the cultural realm of Keralam, a State that was at one time the most advanced in democratic values, despite many a gap.

other oppressed social sections, as well as in the privileges, resources and positions enjoyed by the oppressor castes. Given that caste was intrinsic to pre-capitalist production relations existing in South Asia, this raises questions about the capitalism that is said to have replaced them. Rather than classical capitalism that grew by eliminating feudalism in one or the other way, the one engendered here by colonialism has forever been intertwined with caste-feudalism. It has always served both imperialism and feudalism.

Mao Zedong named it "bureaucratic capitalism," indicating the close association of this capitalism with the state. This goes beyond the usual relation of a class with its state, i.e. the overall securing of its class interests through the state machinery. In bureaucrat capitalism the state has a direct role in the growth or decline of different sections of the big bourgeoisie. Their fortunes wax and wane in direct proportion to their proximity to the current political centre of power. In recent years the term "crony capitalism" has been coined by some to describe the nexus between political players and corporates, and the role of political patronage in business prospects. It is a misnomer. Reducing the matter to one of personal preferences and inclinations, it avoids grappling with the structural role of this relation. In oppressed countries, the state is both a facilitator and site of capital accumulation. In many of these countries, government-owned companies, financial institutions and savings aggregators like insurance companies and large trading concerns exist along with private bureaucrat capital. Even while pursuing their specific interests and having non-antagonistic contradictions with each other, the public and the private complement each other. They form two factions of a single class, the comprador–bureaucrat bourgeoisie.

The borderline between these factions is by no means rigid. Political leaders, members of the higher bureaucracy, upper echelons of the armed forces and others from the top levels of the state machinery amass wealth by appropriating public funds or getting bribes for favouring one or the other foreign or local corporate.

Employing this as capital through close relatives or *benamies* (proxies) they themselves become comprador corporates. In recent years, owners of big private concerns have directly joined the political class as parliament members or ministers.

The roots of this class lie among trading agents and employees of imperialist concerns, and later of the colonial state. Gradually coalescing into a class it has steadily progressed into industry and finance. Lately, prominent private and state-owned monopolies of this class are getting even more integrated with the world imperialist system by setting up industrial units in imperialist countries or buying up existing firms. Some of them get more than half of their total profits from overseas operations. Apparently this seems to indicate that they've become capable of standing on an equal footing with imperialist transnational corporations. In actuality, these compradors are only stepping into businesses vacated by imperialist finance capital for various reasons, a pattern seen from colonial times.

Along with its subservience to imperialism, i.e. its compradorism, caste-feudal values and relations have a living presence in the existence and operations of this class. It is, even today, predominantly composed of *Savarnas*. Its functioning is highly dependent on caste networks, now spanning the state machinery and the political elite. These networks today have more of a *Savarna* nature, rather than being caste specific. Yet, the latter also continues. Brahmanism is an intrinsic part of its ideological outlook.

The fortunes of bureaucrat capitalism are directly related to impulses from imperialism and mediated through the active role of the state. This is equally true of its emergence and spread in the rural sector. The bourgeois state has always played an active role in the capitalist transformation of feudalism. England's enclosure laws were an example. But the role of the state in promoting bureaucrat capitalism in the agrarian sector of an oppressed country is qualitatively different. In the former case, the state's role was limited to creating favourable conditions, through regulations and laws, for the growth of agrarian capitalism. In the latter, the colonial state directly

implanted and grew bureaucrat capitalist relations, transforming feudalism into semi-feudalism. The neo-colonial state continues to play this role through direct and indirect means.

The canal systems built by the British Raj in pre-partition West Punjab and in the Godavari, Krishna deltas were of this nature. Increased productivity led to greater class differentiation of the peasantry and the growth and strengthening of the rich peasantry along with the landlords. They received a further push through the "Green Revolution." State intervention was not limited to infrastructural development. It encompassed inputs as well as capital, advanced as credit, to enable implementation of this package. In some cases minimal land reforms were also carried out. What is notable about these developments is the secondary role of internal agency. Its impetus was and continues to be overwhelmingly external. Not only from outside the rural sector, but more essentially, from outside the country. Quite naturally enough, the rural classes that benefited the most, even entrepreneurs who have emerged, are of a hybrid type. Their existence is bound up with bureaucrat capitalism and imperialism through heavy dependence on them for finances, resources and markets. It is also tied up with persisting caste-feudal relations and values. This is seen in their economic activities, whether in agriculture, industry or services. Caste and Brahmanism remain key media of their sustenance and reproduction. Such is the inevitable outcome of the growth of bureaucrat capitalism.

The emergence and development of capitalism, whether through a radical revolution or gradual evolution, was always accompanied by a fundamental and comprehensive transformation of existent value systems, culture, and social norms, of the whole ideological realm. Unlike this, the persisting, living presence of the old in the new, distinguishes bureaucrat capitalism. This is not a matter of comparing it with some generic type and identifying where it lacks. Western capitalism's claim to be "the universal model" rightly stands debunked today. But that does not mean that the distinguishing features of bureaucrat capitalism can be reduced to the inevitable

uniqueness of every particular process of historical evolution. The fact that those features are common to all oppressed countries, even if modulated by country-specific features, drives in the point that they are something more. This is capitalism of a different type.

Understanding bureaucrat capitalism helps us to situate the apparently perplexing reversal of "anti-reservationist" *Savarna* castes into staunch supporters of caste-based reservation. It explains why caste remains a key form of social existence and mobilisation. Noticeably, while the agitations of the 1980s and 90s were of *Savarna* castes en bloc, now it is a matter of specific caste demands as *Jats*, *Marathas*, *Patels*, etc. Bureaucrat capitalism also explains the steady growth of class differentiation within these castes, which too has a compelling presence in the social dynamics underlying these movements. Subservience to imperialism and conjunction with semi-feudalism are intrinsic to bureaucrat capitalism. All together they impose shackles on the economy and block sustainable, all round growth. Scarce non-farm employment opportunities, both rural and urban, are a consequence—now aggravated by GPL.

The situation of the *Marathas* of Maharashtra is illustrative. Averaging nearly 40 percent of the State's population, they are far better placed than other castes—politically, socially and economically. More than half the Members of Legislative Assembly (MLA) in Maharashtra are *Marathas*. Most educational institutes are owned by the elite of this caste. They are chairpersons of most of the co-operative banks and sugar factories. Meanwhile, in the midst of this prosperity, an increasing number of *Marathas* are joining the ranks of the economically deprived. While the proportion of landless is quite low and those owning above five acres is quite high among them, this is not the case in other size classes. In the middle size classes their share is more or less the same as that of the intermediate castes (OBCs), though better endowed in terms of infrastructure. Their educational attainments too are not any better. A recent survey carried out by the Government of Maharashtra recorded a large number of *Marathas* employed in casual labour across a wide spec-

trum of low-paying occupations. These included works considered as "socially degrading" in caste terms.

Similar class divisions exist among the *Jats*, the dominant caste of Haryana. According to the 2nd Indian Human Development Survey (2011-12), the annual per capita mean income (APMI) of the Haryana *Jats* is much higher than the state average. This rosy picture however vanishes when incomes are disaggregated by quintiles. The top quintiles corner 62.5 percent of the castes' total income, leaving just 4 percent to the bottommost one. The latter's APMI of Rs. 11,191 is just half the average income of *Dalits*. 67 percent of *Jats* depend on agriculture as their main source of income. Only 2.5 percent have government jobs. When this data is coupled with the fact that a businessperson's income was nearly six times more than that of a farmer, one can well understand the multiple dimensions of the sense of deprivation growing among this otherwise dominant caste.[8]

Evidently, class differentiation is playing a key role in the demands of these castes for reservation. A combination, an intertwining, of class and caste dynamics is seen here. It cannot be wholly explained by the usual class polarisation caused by capitalist growth. Neither can it be understood by simply referring to the continuation of social division associated with caste-feudalism. Both of them are drawn into this unique combination by bureaucrat capitalism.

Can the demand of *Savarna* youth for educational and employment opportunities, propelled by class and caste impulses, be satisfied through reservation? We can start answering this by taking a look at its dimensions, the available supply and the demand building up. After excluding currently reserved opportunities, those available for additional reservation would be quite limited. Going by newspaper reports, it would come to 7500 jobs, according to the Chief Minister of Maharashtra. This figure gives a rough idea of the impossibility of satisfying the demands of *lakhs* of Maratha youth through reservation. One sees the same gigantic mismatch between the demands of youth, irrespective of caste, all over the country and

[8] Data from "Jats in Wonderland," Christophe Jafrelot et.al, *Indian Express*, March 10, 2017.

the existing potential for satisfying them. The opportunities are simply not there. Media reports about *lakhs* of applicants turning up for job vacancies numbering a few hundreds, of doctorates and post graduates queuing up for Class D posts, repeatedly drive home this harsh fact.

Reservation will hardly make a dent in the employment situation of *Savarna* youth. Given their higher cultural and social endowments their demand is all the more voluminous. While not being even a partial solution, extending reservation to the *Savarnas* also contains the danger of overturning caste-based reservation itself. Growing impoverishment or economic stagnation among them is indisputable. Nevertheless, compared to the oppressed castes, they still remain better endowed in all senses.[9] In particular, they continue to be dominant. Social relations that reproduce this domination continue to be an integral aspect of the hurdles the *Dalits*, *Adivasis*, intermediate castes and oppressed castes among religious minorities must surmount to gain education, regular employment and a life of dignity. Caste-based reservation hence continues to be a vital necessity for these social groups. Extending it to *Savarnas* would mean equating their situation to that of the socially oppressed sections and concealing their dominant position. It would thus contribute to a strengthening of that position and the consequent oppression suffered by the dominated social groups.

Given the growing class differentiation and economic deprivation among *Savarna* castes, reservation for the economically deprived among them is being proposed by some as a solution. This may seem to be quite progressive. However, since it still allows reservation for these sections on the basis of caste, it contains the retrogressive content of placing the oppressors on the same plane as the oppressed. Grounds would be prepared to eliminate caste criteria for

[9] Comparing data from the 1st and 2nd round of the Indian Human Development Survey (2004-05 and 2011-12) it has been pointed out that the *Marathas*, *Patels* and *Jats*, as compared to *Dalits, Adivasis* and intermediate castes, are closer to *Brahmins* and other *Savarnas* in indicators including poverty, status, educational attainment and occupational status. (*Indian Express*, February 17, 2017)

reservation and replace them with economic ones.[10] Not just deprivation, prosperity too is mediated through caste. A *Dalit* millionaire or a highly placed *Dalit* official still faces caste discrimination. One cannot, therefore simply single out the economic deprivation seen among *Savarnas*, ignoring the privileges and dominance they retain.

That is not to say that deprivations suffered by any section of society need not be considered if they happen to be *Savarna*. Not just economic ones, every disadvantage of gender, different abilities, regional backwardness, etc. must be given due weight and preference in providing educational and employment opportunities. If this principle is applied rigorously in the filling up of unreserved (open) seats and job opportunities, the disadvantages suffered by the less privileged among *Savarnas* would be addressed without affecting caste-based reservation.

The same principle should also be applied within the reserved category. That would secure the interests of the more deprived among oppressed castes and check the growing monopolisation of reservation opportunities by the better off among them. It needs to be emphasised that what is proposed here is totally different from the "creamy layer" principle imposed by the Supreme Court. As noted earlier, even the economically well-endowed among the oppressed castes and *Adivasis* still face discrimination. That is, in itself, sufficient reason for ensuring their reservation rights, regardless of income levels. Sociological experiments have conclusively exposed the bias they face. In one such experiment, *Savarna* candidates were seen to be greatly preferred compared to over-qualified ones from *Dalit* castes. Such biases remain as hurdles throughout the careers of employees from the oppressed sections of society, making reservations in promotions also a vital need.

Agreeing that the demand of *Savarna* youth for reservation is

[10] That is exactly what is being done by the new law which provides for reservation to economically deprived sections of *Savarnas*. Moreover, the criteria has been fixed in a manner whereby almost all *Savarnas*, excluding the uppermost economic strata, can benefit from it. This means that the poor among them will be deprived of opportunities even while the new provision is projected as something made specifically for them.

just, while pleading inability to grant it because of the 50 percent ceiling imposed by the courts, the ruling classes are playing a double game. Though this cut off was imposed by the judiciary, almost all sections of the ruling classes had supported and promoted it, some silently. They saw it as a tool to circumvent the Mandal Commission recommendations and limit reservation opportunities of the intermediate castes.[11] This cut-off has no logic to support it other than the designs of *Savarna* elite to retain their monopoly at all levels of the state structure, including its ideological apparatus. It should be scrapped. *Dalits*, *Adivasis*, intermediate castes and oppressed castes among religious minorities should enjoy reservation rights proportionate to their share of population. Given that the great majority of educational and employment opportunities are now in the private sector, it too should be brought under the ambit of caste-based reservation.

Of course, all of these remedies will only be mere palliatives. Neither reservation nor any form of affirmative action is going to satisfy the demands of the youth, whichever caste they may come from. The present setup just does not permit this. Moreover, the current mode of jobless growth rules out any easing. We must seek basic solutions elsewhere.

The Modi government has proposed a huge buildup of urban centres and a countrywide grid of industrial corridors. It is expected that this will generate sufficient opportunities. Such plans are by no means novel. Nor are they unique to the BJP led NDA. In Keralam, the earlier United Democratic Front (UDF) government led by the Congress and the present CPM led Left Democratic Front (LDF) one have already advanced similar projects. No doubt there is some common external source behind all three of them, which is worth probing. Let that be for now. Can large-scale urbanisation be the

[11] The Mandal Commission was established with a mandate to "identify the socially or educationally backward classes" of India. The Commission's report recommended that members of Other Backward Classes (OBC), estimated to be 55 per cent of the population, be granted reservations to 27% of jobs under the Central government and public sector undertakings. Its recommendations were finally implemented in 1992.

solution? No. Most of the jobs it will deliver will be low-paid, casual ones. Only a narrow minority will get steady, well-paid ones. Even this skewed benefit will be far outweighed by the opportunity costs of the disruption caused in rural livelihoods. That is attested to by each and every one of the new hi-tech cities or extensions of existing cities that have come up during the past couple of decades. Apart from all this, ecological concerns stand against such urban centric growth models.

The solution must address the urban sector too, but its locus has to be in agriculture and the broader rural sector, including semi-urban pockets within it. That is where the vast majority live. A sustainable solution has to address them. It must necessarily rupture from the existent, dominant growth model. The growth that has taken place in agriculture until now has mainly come through technical fixes. After the first flush of the Green, White, etc. revolutions, returns have, on the average, steadily decreased since the 1980s. Ever since then, "off-farm" activities, "integrated" farming (where subsidiary occupations are paired with cultivation) and similar schemes have been propagated as solutions. They have been tried in many States. Results, however, have not been promising. The products of such subsidiary occupations have themselves suffered from price fluctuations.[12]

Nowadays there is much discussion about the recommendations of the MS Swaminathan Commission. One of them calls on the government to ensure a base price for agricultural produce that will give at least 50 percent profit to the peasants. This cannot be a permanent solution. No government will be able to offer prices above market rates for long. At times of abundant harvests it will be forced to limit its purchases. The peasants will be pushed back to their earlier situation. Simply pushing capital and technology or giving higher prices will not suffice; the vast majority doesn't have

[12] According to an NSSO survey, conducted between July 2012 and June 2013, the average monthly crop income of a household (after reducing costs) was just Rs. 4021. It earned Rs. 3365 through subsidiary occupations, bringing the total to Rs. 7383 per month. (*Lok Satta*, April 29, 2017)

the basic resources needed to fruitfully avail them.

At the base, widespread landlessness or lack of land sufficient for even subsistence. At the top, huge landholdings of traditional or new landlords. Even in a State like Punjab, holdings in hundreds of acres are seen. A new trend of real estate corporates and governments building up large holdings as so-called "land banks" is now common throughout the country. Meanwhile, eighty-three percent of the rural households hold less than 30 percent of the land!

Among those who have resources, the very nature of bureaucratic capitalism favours the minority of landlords and wealthy farmers. Rather than building sustainable linkages it goes to strengthen usury and predatory trading by commission agents. Bank and cooperative credit going to fund usury is well documented. The share of institutional credit is above 50 percent in most States. Yet, private money lenders remain the main source of credit for the bottom strata and even the middle ones. Not just money lenders, even the landlords and rich peasantry continue to be the main creditors of the poor and landless peasants. A field study done in Punjab as recently as 2015 noted that 67.8 percent of agricultural labour household debt was sourced from "large farmers." The lower-most land-owning size classes—marginal, small and semi-medium—were mainly dependent on commission agents and moneylenders. Atrocious interest rates imposed by the creditors put a heavy burden on the peasantry. A large number of peasant suicides reported from Maharashtra (currently the "lead" state in the matter) have been caused by indebtedness to private moneylenders.[13] Informal credit inevitably reproduces and reinforces traditional ties of dependence or even bondage.

While the returns of agriculture have either reduced or remained stagnant, the standard of living in rural society at large has gone up. New necessities like education, institutionalised medical treatment and demand for various consumer durables like pressure cookers, fans, television sets and mobile phones, etc. have emerged. A margin of return that would have been considered satisfactory some decades

[13] *Indian Express*, August 19 and December 12, 2016; January 10, 2017

ago has now become quite insufficient to meet multiple needs, even for middle and rich peasants. The burden of new needs and the ever-increasing cost of agriculture have been major factors behind high and growing levels of rural indebtedness. During 2002-12 the share of debt used to meet household expenses went up from 47 percent to 60 percent of the total debt incurred in rural areas. Among *Dalits* and *Adivasis*, 92 and 95 percent of debt respectively go to meet household expenses. Altogether, a growing share of agrarian surplus and wage income is being used to service debt obligations. This reduces expendable income and promotes extreme measures like suicide.

Agriculture's real potential is enchained by all of these relations. In order to unleash a tremendous surge in productivity and generate material conditions for developing a wide range of sustainable linkages, they must be eliminated. The vast majority must be endowed with resources, primarily land. Along with that a wide range of local industrial units engaged in agro-processing, manufacture and repair of agricultural machinery, other industrial activities related to agriculture, livestock rearing, pisciculture, etc., as well as various services should be promoted. A good number of youth would be absorbed in them. The emergence of a vibrant rural economy would also draw back a large section that had migrated to urban centres in search of livelihood.

The reforms proposed here cannot stand separate from a complete overhaul of society aimed at making it self-reliant and equitable. I have kept that aside in order to focus on the rural sector, since redistribution of resources, most importantly land, is the key. It has been argued that large agrarian holdings with a high level of mechanisation and plantations must be exempted from such land reforms and retained under collective or state ownership. This misses the political, social and cultural dimensions of land ownership, particularly in the context of caste oppression. Denial of land ownership to *Dalits* (and even access to it) was a cornerstone of the oppressive relations of caste-feudalism. It persists, as seen in the high degree of

landlessness among *Dalits*. Hence, enabling individual ownership through land redistribution is a must in laying the foundations for the annihilation of caste. Viewing the matter merely from the angle of economies of scale, collectivisation or progress to social ownership would be economist. In the case of large holdings with integrated operations, productivity can be maintained by combining individual ownership with collective operations. On the other hand, the gaining of ownership of land by *Dalit* and other landless will smash centuries old shackles of caste and economic discrimination. The leap in consciousness it will give rise to, if properly led, will unleash great productivity and also lay a solid foundation for progress to collectivisation.

While the equitable redistribution of land remains key, we must also consider the undeniable and growing trend of moving away from agriculture. Most notably, this is seen precisely among those sections who most need land. Despite this need, the dire situation seen among those who already have land turns them away. 70 percent of farmer suicides have taken place among those holding 2.5 to 25 acres. There was a 40 percent increase in suicides during 2014-15 and most of them took place in regions where GM (genetically modified) seeds, promoted as the next leap in agriculture, have been introduced on a large scale.[14] The outlook for agriculture is indeed rather gloomy. It isn't surprising that large sections of even the landless peasantry don't consider ownership of land as a reliable means of livelihood. The trend of moving away from agriculture is most prominent among the youth. For *Dalit* youth, there is the additional impulse to move away from agriculture as part of escaping from traditional ties of subservience.

Despite all of this, the land hunger of the landless remains strong. This is translated into persistently increasing shares of "pure tenant" (those without own land) in the total number of tenants. Objective conditions evidently restrict their options for moving out, whatever their subjective inclination may be. Moreover, not just as an economic asset, land ownership still remains decisive in the social

[14] *Indian Express,* January 9, 2017

domain. It is still central in describing and deciding social status and political hegemony. The reform of agriculture, boosting productivity and enabling all-around growth, is still crucial for satisfying the growing demand for jobs. So how can this gap between the subjective mood of turning away from agriculture and the objective reality of its still remaining key for meaningful advance be bridged?

To attempt a solution we must start by recognising that the outlook of peasantry on agriculture and land is quite varied, region-wise. In backward areas and *Adivasi* regions, land continues to be primarily considered as a means of livelihood. In *Adivasi* regions it has an additional dimension of being part of their identities, of their spiritual beliefs. Whereas in most other areas, the overwhelming outlook is that of seeing land as a commercial asset, even while it continues to be used for farming and related activities. Some studies on anti-displacement struggles have noted this difference. In the former areas the predominant mood was fierce opposition to land alienation. In the latter, the resistance focused on getting just compensation and jobs.

This suggests the need for varied tactics while taking up the land question. In regions where the attachment to land is predominantly agrarian, "land to the real tillers" will remain central to immediate mobilisation. In other regions, even while retaining its centrality in a strategic sense, it will be of limited value as an immediate demand for mobilising struggle. In these places, the struggle against the all-round domination, bondages of patronage and the appropriation of public wealth carried out by old and newly emerged exploiters would be key in an immediate sense. They are mostly landlords, but not only so. Their hegemony is usually concretised through the nexus with local political leaders, government officials and instruments of state power like the police. Quite often, they or their extended family members themselves occupy these positions.

Apart from exploitation of economic surplus, illegal cornering and control of public wealth and resources become their principle means of amassing surplus many a time. Opposition is put down

with their own armed gangs or through the state machinery. The local police itself functions as their executors. The struggle against the hegemony of these exploiters will bring out the real relations blocking the advance of the peasantry. It will also expose the central role of monopoly control by a minority over resources, including land, in sustaining these relations and the need for radical reform to end it. Coupled with a broad vision of all-round transformation and the role agriculture and the rural sector must fulfil in order to provide it a solid foundation, this can thus provide the means to check and reverse the trend of moving away from agriculture.

The ongoing agitations of *Savarna* youth for reservations open space for raising some penetrating questions. In the initial decades after the transfer of power in 1947, the rulers were assuring us of rapid industrialisation through "import substitution" and then, later, "export-led growth." The Green Revolution was being heralded until the 1990s. Since then, all their talk is about GM seeds. Simultaneously, double digit growth was promised through the GPL agenda. Why have all these promises failed? Why is it that a full 70 years after the transfer of power, even *Savarna* youth are being forced to seek relief in extremely limited opportunities that may come through reservation? More than the proximate reasons pushing youth of this or that caste into agitations for reservations such fundamental questions must be raised. We must get into a critical examination of all the growth strategies followed since 1947.



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On the Specificities of Brahmanist Hindu Fascism

Fascism as a political ideology has its origins in the crisis-ridden monopoly capitalism of imperialist countries. It is a form of bourgeois rule. The growth of neo-fascist political parties and the repeated electoral successes of Rightists in imperialist countries are directly related to the continuing economic slowdown experienced in those countries, triggered by the financial crisis of 2007-08. They are greatly aided by the resurgence of narrow nationalism, which portrays the "other" (mostly identified as immigrants) as the main cause for economic stress.

As a form of bourgeois rule, elements of the fascist ideology are quite often internalised by the modern ruling classes of the Third World, i.e. the oppressed countries, as well. It is blended with the autocratic, "rule by edict" system of rule commonly seen in the past under feudal regimes all over the world. In the imperialist countries also, fascism resurrected aspects of the feudal polity, replacing bourgeois democracy's "rule of law" and "formal equality." But there is a difference in the oppressed nations stemming from persisting semi-feudal socio-economic and cultural relations. As a result, even when forms of bourgeois rule like the parliamentary system exist, they are inherently flawed. The blending is a permanent feature. The switch over from a formal parliamentary system with constitutionally assured rights to the blatant suppression of democratic rights, has an economic dimension even in an oppressed country. The difference lies in the near total permanence of economic distress.

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When it comes to the situation in India, the inherent flaw of the parliamentary system is often discounted or ignored by mainstream political analysts. They consider this country to be a mature democracy compared to other Third World countries. The decades long sustenance of the parliamentary system and separation of powers between the legislature, executive, and judiciary, are given as proof. Fascist rule, like the one seen during the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi, is taken to be an aberration. A closer look would reveal something else.

For example, the application of the "one person, one vote" principle in India produces results quite opposite to the promise of political equality (even if formal) it is supposed to assure. As warned by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, what it actually does is to reproduce a "permanent communal majority," rather than a changeable "political majority." An examination of the caste composition of the Lok Sabha proves him correct. The BJP has replaced the Congress as the main political representative of the ruling classes. So long as the Congress was in that position it enjoyed solid backing from the *Savarna* Hindus. They have now shifted their allegiance to the BJP. Meanwhile, the new Lok Sabha (LS) also remains overwhelmingly *Savarna* Hindu. Their share in Members of Parliament (MP) is nearly half of the total. Though the political dispensation has changed, the communal majority enjoyed by the *Savarna* Hindus throughout the nearly seven decades of the Indian parliamentary system remains unchanged.

This then is the context in which we must situate and analyse the fascism being promoted in India, presently by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) through the Modi government. It is an outgrowth of the reactionary foundations on which the Indian parliamentary system rests. By reactionary foundations I mean persisting semi-feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism unique to all oppressed countries. But that is not all. It also represents a further step in the ruling classes' project to tackle and overcome the long-standing legitimacy crisis they have been facing for decades. Under

the RSS dispensation it has acquired a distinct hue and doubly venomous content. This makes it appropriate to name it Brahmanist Hindu fascism. But Brahmanism is by no means restricted to the Sangh Parivar, the larger grouping of organisations spawned by the RSS. Therefore, to make an accurate analysis of this fascism it must be done in a broader context.

The aggressive Brahmanist stance advocated by the RSS and other Hinduvadi forces existed parallel to the Gandhi-Nehru ideological theme from the beginning itself, vigorously contesting it all along. But that stream never gained traction among the ruling classes. In the aftermath of the Gandhi assassination, it even faced severe isolation and suppression. Yet it was never completely excluded. On the contrary, it had always been allowed some space, even if limited. The passage of this aggressive Brahmanist stance from the margins to the dominant position it now enjoys in the hegemonic consensus of the ruling classes has been the most significant development in the Indian polity during the past few decades. It can be properly situated and understood only if it's viewed in the light of the legitimacy crisis of the Indian state and the direction taken in the recasting of the ruling classes' hegemonic consensus. Otherwise one will remain trapped in the superficiality of parliamentary politics.

Brahmanism has always been at the core of the Indian ruling classes' ideological make up.[1] It was a key ingredient during the emergence, coalescence and alliance forging of these classes during the British period, as ruling classes in the making/waiting. Yet this was not the Brahmanism of the Middle Ages, of caste-feudalism. Complying with the pressures and influences of colonial modernity, it was recast, remoulded. Moreover, throughout this period, in keeping with the changing demands to be addressed while shaping the consensus being forged under the hegemony of these classes, its articulation and stance have been modified. This became particularly noticeable with the formation of the Indian National Congress (INC) in the late 19th century and its successful positioning at the

[1] See *Critiquing Brahmanism*, K. Murali (Ajith), Kanal Publication Centre, Manantawady/FLP, Paris, 2020.

van of the anti-colonial struggle.

The forging of a hegemonic consensus is never a top down, linear, affair. It always has to respond to, and even adapt to the pressures from below from the people. The gradual awakening of the broad masses to political life under colonialism thus soon found its resonance in a deepening rift within the INC, between the "moderates" and the "militants." The latter's insistence on political action, as opposed to the petitioning of the former, gained them favour among the masses. But there was also another side to this. The "militants" unabashedly defended Brahmanism as a matter of "national pride." They explicitly placed it as an integral component of the "Indianness" sought to be articulated by them. Social reforms were vigorously resisted. This exclusion of the "social reformist" agenda had its repercussions. Both with their own agencies and as response to the uncompromising Brahmanism espoused by "militant" leaders like B.G. Tilak, more and more social sections began to distance themselves from the Congress. The "militant" stream thus ran into a dead end. This prepared the entry of M.K. Gandhi and a new recasting of the hegemonic consensus being forged.

In the new dispensation the stress was on Brahmanism's capacity to retain and extend its domination through accommodating and assimilating the "other." The concerns of all those social sections organising and struggling outside the Congress were partially addressed. The INC expanded into a conglomeration of diverse interest groups headed by the emerging ruling classes. The Brahmanism they favoured during this period was implicit. It was one of moderation, infused with prominent aspects of modernity's political symbols. Take the case of the local elite's imagining of an "Indian" nation. This was made possible by colonialism. As such it was a very modern product. Yet it was also useful to breathe new life into Brahmanism's dream of a "Bharat" spanning the whole subcontinent. Simultaneously, by providing a sense of ancient origins, Brahmanism allowed this creation of colonialism to be conceived as the resurgence of a held back, glorious past. Continuing as an

integral component of this "Indianness," Brahmanism was now positioned implicitly, embedded in the discourses of modernity. The Brahmanist precept of "unity in diversity" secures its supremacy by deeming all diversity to be mere manifestations of a "one" acclaimed by it. This was now projected as the ethos of the "Indian" nation, thus placing it at the root of all the actually existing nationalities. Gandhi was instrumental in this whole endeavour. Many others also contributed. In particular Jawaharlal Nehru brought in a "Western" slant, with economic "development" as a major theme.

Under neo-colonial conditions of indirect imperialist control and exploitation, the semblance of independence is of much importance for the local ruling classes as well as for imperialism. Post-1947, imperialist designed and funded projects and technology were absorbed. Deeper penetration of foreign finance capital was welcomed. All of this was heralded as development, right in the midst of this heightened dependence. Thus, the false consciousness of independence and development became crucial in the new hegemonic consensus.

The pretension of secularism was yet another of its prominent ingredients. Secularism can only mean the separation of the state from religion, making it the private affair of a citizen. This was never the case in India. Instead, the state's "equal treatment of all religions" was deemed as secularism. In practice, it always favoured the majority religious community. Religious minorities, especially the Muslims, were dealt with in a prejudiced manner. The dismal conditions of the Muslim masses, even after more than five decades of "secular" rule was well exposed in the Sachar Committee report[2]. Yes, there certainly has been a spike in attacks on Muslims under the Modi Raj. The unabashed justification of such attacks by their perpetrators, the apathy of government agencies, the socio-political-cultural milieu where such murderous incidents get accommodated as the "new normal"—these are surely new developments. However, one

[2] A High-Level Committee headed by former Chief Justice of Delhi High Court Rajinder Sachar, formed in 2005 to study the social, economic and educational condition of Muslims in India.

must also not forget that they have their antecedents in decades old state and non-state violence against Muslims and other religious minorities.

This "new normal" also needs to be situated in the socio-political process it has emerged from and which it further embellishes. Otherwise we would end up in simplistic and artificial divisions. The distinction sought between a supposedly "secular democratic" past and a threatening "ethnic democratic" future is one such example. An index offered for such differentiation is the underrepresentation of Muslims in the Lok Sabha. The fact is that this has been the norm throughout. It has never been anywhere close to their proportion in the population, right from the very first LS of 1952. Yet, just like triumphalist sermons on "self-reliance" masked deepening dependence on imperialism, secularism too remained a convenient disclaimer absolving the Indian State and the party in power of their communal crimes.

These elements of the hegemonic consensus started to face severe stress from the 1960s onwards. The reality of imperialist dependence and the hollowness of the "socialist, secular, democratic" claims of the rulers, became more and more exposed. Their state's legitimacy was increasingly being challenged by various sections of the struggling masses and by national movements. The Naxalbari armed peasant rebellion shook up the whole country. Attempting to regain ground and restore the hegemonic consensus, the INC led by Indira Gandhi first tried a mix of populism coupled with fascist rule. When that failed, an ideological remoulding raising the need to revise hitherto sanctioned views on caste-based reservation, secularism and other elements of the old consensus was promoted. The state-controlled, public sector-led economic model began to be dismantled. The semblance of self-reliance made way for deeper penetration of Transnational Corporations (TNC). All of this would take a leap with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the wholesale promotion of the globalisation agenda in the 1990s. There was greater concentration of power at the Center The Prime Minister's Office

emerged as the real centre of power. Congress ideologues began to openly raise the need to shift to a Presidential style of elections and governance in place of the existing Westminster model. Elections began to be focused on personalities.

The recasting of the hegemonic consensus was accompanied by a conscious attempt to bind the *Savarna* Hindu castes into an all-India compact as a core social base of the state. Energetic promotion of "national integration," vicious suppression of revolutionary movements and nationality struggles and aggressive expansionist acts against neighbouring countries—all of these were put in service of fanning up national chauvinism, now openly given a Hindu communal colour. Over the years, the undertones of the new hegemonic consensus being shaped became more and more apparent as an explicit Brahmanism, packaged as resurgent Hinduism. All sections of the ruling classes, their political representatives across the whole spectrum from right to left, have endorsed and promoted it. The attack on the Golden Temple, pogroms against the Sikhs, the opening of the Babri Masjid giving a boost to the RSS' plans eventually leading to its demolition—all of this took place under Congress rule. Rajiv Gandhi symbolically launched his Lok Sabha election campaign from Ayodhya. This was also the period when a Supreme Court bench had conveniently declared "Hindutva" to be a "way of life," greatly aiding the RSS and other Hinduvadis. While the ruling classes as a whole endorsed the promotion of explicit Brahmanism, they differed among themselves (and still do) on the limits of its aggressiveness and the modes of its articulation.

The extension of reservation to the intermediary castes (OBCs) at the Central level by the VP Singh government's implementation of the Mandal Commission's recommendations and the rise of caste-based parties like the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) were two important developments during this period. Were they countercurrents to the ideological remoulding going on? These developments are often lumped together and termed the "Mandalisation of the polity." However, the social dynamics under-

lying them were distinct. They need to be examined separately. The implementation of the Mandal recommendations certainly was a tactical move aimed at checking the RSS' game plan. But that was not all. It was also intended to ease caste contradictions inevitably sharpened by the promotion of explicit Brahmanism and thus related to the overall design of the consensus recasting being pursued. Similar in intention was the countrywide celebration of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's birth centenary, also initiated from the Center by the VP Singh government. In the process, he was being positioned as some sort of a "Father of the Constitution" and co-opted into the ruling classes' political pantheon. His primary and prominent role in the anti-Brahmanist struggle was thus back-sided.

Struggles to get the Mandal recommendations implemented, going against *Savarna* resistance, did produce a new awareness among the oppressed castes. To that extent it brought forth a countercurrent and also gave a boost to the growth of caste-based parties. But their formation and growth were essentially propelled by a different dynamic. The breaking away of social sections from the Congress conglomeration was already underway. It was not limited to the *Dalit* and intermediary castes alone. In some States *Savarna* castes concerned over the prospects of being sidelined in State politics moved away from the Congress. In some others, caste and nationality interests combined, allowing the formation of a broader breakaway. It was propelled by nationality based exploiting classes trying to shake off the control of an all-India party in order to facilitate their growth by gaining greater and direct control over governmental power at the State level. In yet other regions, alienation from the Congress was spurred on by economic stagnation arising from the plateauing of the "Green Revolution." Overall, these developments indicated the sharpening of contradictions—economic, political and social. The new parties that emerged represented the aspirations and concerns of new elites forming within various social sections, located in the nationalities and cultural regions. It opened up the spell of coalition governments, with and without an all-India

party as anchor. The political churning this gave rise to did complicate the ruling classes' ideological project as well. However, soon enough the new elites also were integrated with the ruling classes and became participants in its remoulding exercise. The metamorphosis of the BSP from *Savarna* baiting to locating its own symbols in Brahmanist iconography is a striking example of this transition.

The Sangh Parivar stands at an extreme in the explicit Brahmanism commonly endorsed by the ruling classes. However, it would be wrong to identify this as an "exclusionist" position as opposed to some "inclusiveness" favoured by others like the Congress. Brahmanism thrives on the graded assimilation of the "other." It excludes the "other" from an equal status precisely by allowing such graded space to it. It privileges itself by what may be termed as an "exclusionist inclusion." There is therefore nothing new or unusual in the sermons of RSS leaders on being inclusive, even while their fascist minions go around lynching Muslims and *Dalits.* Modi's tacking on "Sabka viswas" to his earlier spiel of "Sabka saath, sabka vikas" is very much a part of this.

Other than its extreme in aggressiveness, the shaping being given by the RSS to the hegemonic consensus has its own specificity. They are born of compulsions particular to it. To put its stamp on it, the RSS must recast it completely, displacing and marginalising the Gandhi-Nehru legacy. This is being done through an exercise in the de-hyphenation of the Gandhi-Nehru pair. While Gandhi is given a makeover projecting his "localness," Nehru is vehemently excluded, emphasising his "foreignness."

The Congress has all along staked a monopoly claim on representing the country all along by foregrounding its role as the main political stream in the anti-colonial struggle. This was a major facet of the old consensus. The Gandhi-Nehru legacy is tightly enmeshed with it. So long as it retains some credibility, the formal enthroning of an RSS-brand aggressive Brahmanism at the core of the new hegemonic consensus cannot be realised with full force. Crude substitution of its aggressive stance in place of the benign one of the Gand-

hi-Nehru theme, while leaving the latter's claim to an exceptional anti-colonial pedigree unchallenged, is not feasible. The historical record of the Sangh Parivar and its founder leaders simply won't allow it. They kept away from the anti-British struggle. The broader Hinduvadi forces too were no better.

Given this burden of its past, the RSS has been energetically pursuing a multi-pronged strategy aimed at manufacturing its own "nationalist" narrative. This ranges from crude chauvinism centred on flaunting symbols and slogans born of its bigotry, to the appropriation of historical icons of past struggles, social as well as national. Facts are stretched to "prove" the participation of the RSS in the anti-colonial struggle. In order to offset the Congress' monopoly claim on that struggle, it publicises all other streams hitherto ignored or sidelined in official narratives. (Those led by Communists and Muslims are carefully avoided.) In all of this, a repositioning or re-reading of their icons as votaries of Hinduvada, even if as mild ones, is sought to be realised.

Along with this, it has gone all out to establish its brand of communal chauvinism as the sole credential of patriotism. We are also treated to big talk on India's "arriving" on the world stage as a "power," by its own strength. Under Modi this propaganda has been taken to ridiculous heights even as India is getting tightly tied up into the US military web. While the "India as a world power" balloon is blown up by the RSS with Modi as poster-boy, the risk of the Indian people getting dragged into US instigated conflicts has greatly heightened.

The RSS is trying its best to draw the *Dalit*, intermediary castes and *Adivasis* into its folds. Through this it tries to address two separate, yet interrelated, challenges. One of them is of an ideological nature. It is that of papering over the inevitable sharpening of social divisions that accompany the promotion of aggressive Brahmanism. The blatant attempt to appropriate Ambedkar is an example. The other challenge is born of immediate electoral compulsions, i.e. the need to form broad caste-based alliances. It needs this to offset the

threat posed by caste-based parties like the BSP or SP. The Congress too had its caste, communal, electoral alliance, mostly *Savarna-Dalit*-Muslim. In the case of the RSS, it has the burden of squaring its alliances with its aggressive brand of Brahmanism, normally repulsive to these castes. It has sought to do this by playing on intra-*Dalit*, intra-intermediary caste contradictions. It has succeeded in building a broad alliance, pulling in the smaller *Dalit* and intermediary castes. Much more than the successful appeal of a "common" Hinduness standing above caste divisions or the "chemistry" of Modi, this secured it greater vote shares and seats in states like UP and Bihar. To give the example of UP, these castes remain relatively disadvantaged vis-à-vis those like the *Jatav* or *Yadav*, dominant among the *Dalits* and intermediary castes of that State. A combination of the *Savarnas*, non-*Yadav* intermediary castes and non-*Jatav Dalits* easily outstrips the *Jatav*, *Yadav* and Muslims, who collectively come to only forty percent. This was the basic arithmetic at work—the one of caste.

Apart from the shrewdness of such electoral tactics, what is of more interest in the long run is the material grounds that allow their successful deployment. An elite has emerged within the oppressed castes. They are getting Brahmanised in direct proportion to the growth of their exploitative interests. On their own, they have been "sanitising" their struggling pasts and leaders to suit them to their current interests and supposedly improved social status. Hence, there is much that is complementary between the social dynamics driving these elites and the RSS' appropriation strategy. Any attempt to counter the RSS' electoral tactics with exclusively caste-based alliances thus inevitably runs into an inherent obstacle.

In India, the parliamentary system remains the preferred form of governance due to certain particularities of the country. The first of these is its extreme social fragmentation with its abundance of castes, communal groupings, nationalities, ethnicities and regional identities. The second one is the absence of a dominant nationality or cohesive social group that could be made the social base of the

state. Neither the "Hindi belt," nor the *Savarna* Hindus, or even the Hindus as a whole can satisfy this need. Each of them is riven with divisions. Greater doses of Brahmanism only go to harden them, even as they join up against the "other," the Muslims.

These are the unique conditions of our society that make the parliamentary system eminently suitable for the ruling classes. It allows some distribution of governmental power and opportunity to corner a share of the spoils of exploitation. It has the potential to accommodate various echelons of the exploitative classes, even some layers of the middle classes, and of course, varying patterns of caste representation. All this can be done while maintaining and exercising the overall hegemony of the ruling classes. The functioning of the parliamentary system surely does generate a lot of centrifugal pulls and complicates Central governance. Therefore, the resolution of the legitimacy crisis may finally end up with a more centralised presidential system with an elected president enjoying executive powers and a curtailment of fundamental rights. Even then, the parliamentary system with its layers of governmental and administrative potential for co-option will most likely be retained alongside it.

Buoyed up by their sweeping victory, BJP leaders boast that this is now going to be repeated for several coming elections. That is a baseless claim. If not for Pulawama and the Balakot air strike, the outcome of the recent elections would not have been so favourable to it. Given the dim global economic scene, further complicated by aggressive protectionism and the growing contention among the big imperialist powers, the prospects of an economic upturn in India are rather bleak. The huge majority the BJP has won is not going to change this material reality, just as it did not during its last term. A slew of anti-people, anti-labour legislation, more sell offs of public assets, and greater easing of conditions for the penetration of imperialist capital, all packaged as "bold reforms", are already on its way. Coupled with this is the promotion of rabid jingoism and communal Muslim-baiting. However, given the above scene, they are unlikely to be of much use in terms of triggering "growth" (for

whatever that is worth). The only outcome one can reliably predict is that these measures will surely call up larger sections of the masses into struggle. As a result, the electoral prospects of the BJP may well get reversed as its present term progresses. The larger question still remains—how can the promotion of explicit, aggressive Brahmanism be countered and reversed? Can a revival of the Congress and its allies assure this?

Right now the Congress finds itself in a rather unfavourable situation. The two ends holding up its traditional vote alliance, the *Savarnas* and *Dalits*, have pulled away, damning it to crash. Though varying from State to State its Muslim vote base is on the whole holding up. But that won't be of much help by itself. Even though it is hanging on to the Gandhi-Nehru legacy, this is more in appearance than substance. It is no less explicit in its Brahmanism or aggressive in advocacy of the globalisation agenda. Given its class nature it cannot but be so. Besides, since "globalisation with a human face" is now part of the imperialist agenda, there is not much it can offer by way of social welfare that cannot be met in equal measure by the BJP. As for foreign policy, the tilt towards the US and willingness to get entangled in its military web was initiated by the Congress itself. Here too it cannot offer anything new other than some fine calibration. Despite all of this, the Congress is not going to be wiped out of existence. Modi is not going to be granted his wish of a "Congress-mukt" India. The ruling classes still need it as an all-India counterpoint: a role no State party can fulfil.

The chances of the Congress making a comeback by gaining a majority on its own are extremely remote. But it can hope to regain power as part of a coalition. As was proven by the UPA-1 and 2, a coalition with the Congress as its anchor is quite acceptable and workable for the ruling classes and imperialism. Moreover, a functioning Congress is necessary for them for a more fundamental reason. A parliamentary system can remain meaningful only so long as the possibility of switching parties from government to opposition benches and vice versa is retained. As noted earlier, the parlia-

mentary system remains the preferred form of governance in India due to certain particularities of the country. Since the promotion of explicit Brahmanism is not something simply limited to Hinduvadi outfits like the RSS, it would be futile to seek weapons against it in the Congress or other parliamentary parties. Neither will they come from the Gandhi-Nehru arsenal.

The task is to confront and undermine the ruling classes' hegemonic consensus being forged with explicit, aggressive, Brahmanism at its core. That cannot be fulfilled by seeking refuge in the benign Brahmanism of the Gandhi-Nehru type. Moreover, democracy has no obligation to defend this legacy against the Hinduvadis. The liberalism it displayed, the democracy it professed, was superficial. It avoided the basic issues of democratisation in our context—even those of a bourgeois nature. This *Savarna* stream of democracy was satisfied with modifications in caste-feudalism and the reworking of Brahmanism to suit the modern needs of the exploiters, new and old. It must not be confused or equated with the democratic values generated by the masses through their struggles or the rights they have gained through them. At various levels, and in varying degrees, these dealt with the basic issues of democratisation. They dealt with its political, social, economic and cultural dimensions. Not the *Savarna* stream of democracy but this *Avarna* stream, with its roots going all the way back to the anti-Brahmanist Bhakti movements, must be made the basis for any meaningful struggle against the Brahmanist fascist agenda of the RSS and its cohorts. However, a mere recall of those values and teachings will not suffice.

All of those movements emerged from and responded to existing conditions. They cannot be simply stretched out to suit our times. The material conditions that have given rise to Brahmanist Hindu fascism within the recasting of the ruling classes' hegemonic consensus are a complex ensemble. Not just the interests of the ruling classes, those of contemporary imperialism are also enmeshed with it. Present day Brahmanism is not the old one. It is neither that of the colonial period, nor even of the early decades after the

transfer of power in 1947. For example, it is conscious of the heightened awareness seen among various oppressed social sections. New tools and stratagems to co-opt their leaders and subvert them are being developed by it. Moreover, class division is very much present and growing among the *Savarnas* too. Among the peasants murdered by government policies and misguidedly recorded as "suicides," a good number come from these castes. So too is a large share among the impoverished labourers in urban centres. The concerns of all oppressed sections, including these, should be addressed, while drawing on the people's traditions of anti-Brahmanist struggles. This cannot be done through caste, or religious community alliances, no matter how representative they are. It cannot be done through the parliamentary system. What is needed are grassroots movements; movements that address class, caste, gender, ethnic, religious minority, nationality, regional and environmental issues need to be promoted. A broad, radical democratic platform and a counter-consensus must be given shape through them. This is what is needed to build a powerful, consistent struggle against the RSS and the fascist cohorts within the broader, radical perspective of confronting the ruling classes.

(June 2019)



Some Semi-Feudal Traits of the Indian Parliamentary System

Over the years, there has been a steady increase in the number of "dynasts," i.e. progeny continuing the "MP/MLA profession" of their families. Their share has gone up to 8.6 percent from the negligible 0.7 percent in 1952 seen in the first Lok Sabha. That comes to a twelvefold increase! Dynasts are certainly not unique to the political realm. They are everywhere in India—in the higher judiciary, higher echelons of the bureaucracy and armed forces, in the corporate world and, of course, in the media and entertainment fields. So what does this reveal? Is it a mere indication of an unseemly nepotistic streak seen among some of the privileged? No. Nepotism is not the cause. It is merely the actualisation of a systemic feature of our society. These dynasts seen in diverse fields indicate the presence of semi-feudalism. It is intrinsic to all the structures and social realms bequeathed by colonial modernity and further embellished under neo-colonialism.

The *zamindari*, with its land and privileges, was passed on from generation to generation.[1] So too are electoral constituencies retained for years together as "family seats" and handed over to successive generations. Not just constituencies, whole political parties have become family property. When there is no direct issue who can become the "rightful" heir, a nephew is summoned to fulfil the need! The operative word here is "family," or rather, "family control" to be more precise. All parliamentary parties in India, except those

[1] A system of landholding and revenue collection by *zamindars*, feudal lords, based on land grants known as *jagirs*.

of the Left, can be safely described as systems of families and their alliances, arrayed from the highest to the lowest level. The BJP is no exception, despite being born, manned and led by a cadre organisation like the RSS. Excluding its highest level, dynastic families and electoral *jagirs* are very much part of it. It too has its fair share of dynasts in the present Lok Sabha.

The semi-feudalism manifested through political dynasts is seen in yet another striking feature of the Indian parliamentary system. This is the business of defections. The ease with which defections are carried out is a sharp exposure of how inconsequential the mass of electors really are: except when they are summoned to vote. Defections do attract opprobrium and are seen as morally reprehensible. Yet, it is also accepted as a legitimate tool for pulling down a government or manufacturing a majority. The law does not prohibit defections. It only regulates them. An elected representative's switching allegiance from one party to another apparently looks like some greedy, power hungry individual's treachery. But there is more to it. That person won't be coming alone. She or he will also bring over a large chunk of assured votes. These could be caste or communal vote banks. When the defector is a political dynast, such gain is guaranteed beyond all doubt. In recent years the BJP has been perfecting this tool. In fact, defections have played a major role in the gains it has recently made, perhaps even more than the "Modi factor" and rabid Hinduvadi chauvinism.

Defections became a regular feature of parliamentary politics around the late 1960s and early 1970s. Its coincidence with the beginning of the legitimacy crisis of the state and the weakening of the Congress system was not accidental. It was both a reflection and product of those developments. Defections are accompanied by material benefits—a ministership, chairpersonship, and, of course, suitcases stuffed with cash. However, that does not explain the whole phenomenon. The ease with which en bloc defections take place nowadays is indicative of something more, something that can be characterised as a "seamless ideological milieu." One of its facets

is crass cynicism, the awareness among political agents of the ruling classes that there is nothing that could even remotely be termed as principled in their political system and the knowledge that the electorate also knows this quite well. The other facet is the general agreement among all shades of ruling-class politicians on the need for a recasting of the hegemonic consensus, their common acceptance of the need for one or another form of explicit Brahmanism and subservience to the globalisation agenda of imperialism. Given this, being in this or that party hardly makes a difference. Since most voters are tied to this or that leader rather than allied to a political platform, they too don't feel much compunction in pressing some new button as instructed from above. This is now increasingly true of the parliamentary Left's traditional vote base as well. The wholesale shifting of Left voters to the BJP seen in Bengal is explained by some as an act of desperation, meant to hold off the immediate threat posed by the Trinamool. That was in play, no doubt. More important, however, is their susceptibility to the RSS' communal propaganda. Puja celebrations, with all of its Brahmanist rituals, have been officially enthroned in the parliamentary Left's mass politics in Bengal for decades. The distance from there to the sword-waving Ram Navami processions of the RSS is not all that great.

Seetaram Yechury, the CPM secretary, is reported to have criticised the Congress for trying to counter the RSS with "soft Hindutva." Have his party and its allies on the Left been offering anything distinctly different? Take the case of Keralam where the Sabarimala issue was capitalised by the Sangh Parivar, ably aided by the Pinarayi government with its ham-handed handling of the issue. A belated attempt was made by the CPM to counter the RSS propaganda by appealing to the social reform traditions of Keralam and even mobilising *lakhs* to form a symbolic "women's wall." Despite all of this it had to face the ignominy of trailing the BJP in six assembly constituencies, something unprecedented. Evidently, a good chunk of Hindu voters, traditionally with the Left Democratic Front, had switched their preference to the BJP. Was this a temporary affair,

a case of those voters getting momentarily swayed by RSS propaganda?

The fact of the matter is that the CPM and its Left allies have departed from the anti-Brahmanist, democratic values of the social reform movements and even those of their struggling pasts. They had long since abandoned any meaningful, consistent effort to propagate those values. A large number of the leaders, cadres and almost all of their mass following are fully involved in the day-to-day affairs of communal caste organisations. They are present in temple, mosque and church committees. There they function with as much conservative, obscurantist zeal as those from other parties like the Congress or BJP. The misogynist prohibition of menstruating women from Sabarimala is of recent origins. It was part of a conscious effort to deepen the Brahmanisation of that temple, originally a shrine of the Mala Araya *Adivasis*. Yet, despite having trade unions and staunch party cadres within the temple administration, neither the CPM nor its allies ever took a stand against this move or tried to conscientise the believers. The harsh social reality in Keralam is that today the minds, thinking and social practices of the average LDF sympathiser is quite communal and casteist. Normally they are not rabid like someone in the Sangh Parivar's sphere of influence. But they can easily be turned in that direction. This was the potential actualised in the recent elections by the BJP.

The Maoist Party

What should be the qualities of an organisation to become the vanguard of a new society and humans, what should be the methods of party building corresponding to this, and what should be the position of the party within the dictatorship of the proletariat? Can a proletarian party retain its communist qualities today without becoming a Maoist party? Is the Maoist party just another name for communist party? Or does it contain something new, in its very nature and methods of work?

In the capitalist age, classes (or sections within them) express and realise their interests mainly through the instrument of a political party (a social organisation). Marx posed the necessity for the proletariat to form its own party in order to achieve its aims in contending with enemy classes. This was developed as a scientific theory, verified and established through practice by Lenin. The core of the Leninist party concept are the professional revolutionaries; those who devote themselves completely to revolutionary activity, who make this their profession. It has been criticised that this leads to an elite who lords over the proletariat. Furthermore, Lenin's viewpoint that workers cannot, on their own, arrive at the ideology guiding their liberation; his proposition that it must be reached to them from outside, have been remarked on as a celebration of elitism. The Leninist party concept is accused of being the concrete expression of this mindset, one that undervalues the potential of the workers.

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Some argue that while the evils of this party concept were held in check by Lenin's personal qualities so long as he was alive, they broke out in a monstrous death dance under Stalin.[1]

Let us first acquaint ourselves with the ideological struggles that took place on this issue, during the period in which the Leninist party concept took form. Its starting point was the debate in the Second Congress of the undivided Russian Communist Party (then known as the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party) on the matter of the party constitution. The Rightists (Trotsky included) accused Lenin's draft statutes of promoting ultra-centralisation. Even his insistence on membership criteria that made it mandatory to join a party committee and participate in its practice was, in their view, an example of unwanted centralisation. Their counterproposal would allow anyone who helped the party become a member. They would thus make it a loose organisation of spare-time activists. This was the crux of the difference between Lenin and his adversaries.

Lenin clearly realised the need for an organisation of those prepared to be frontline activists in a revolutionary movement aimed at seizing power, those who devoted their whole lives to this task and thus acquired the necessary leadership qualities and skills. His party concept evolved from this vision. The specific situation in Czarist Russia, which ruled out all open activity and made it imperative to constantly evade the secret police, certainly was a major influencing factor in this. The weight of such specificities can be seen in Lenin's insistence on the total centralisation to be enjoyed by the party's leading body and the strict division of tasks—almost like the division of labour in a modern factory—among different party committees and committee members. But is must also be noted that a departure from the 2nd International's party concept was implicit in this approach, though the immediate context it addressed was the Russian situation. This is where Lenin separated from his contemporaries on the party question. Leaving aside diehard Rightist attacks, let us elabourate this by getting into the criticisms made by Rosa Luxemburg, and also Trotsky (who was in the revolutionary camp

[1] Pearson, Mathrubhumi – 87/3, March 29, 2009.

for a while).

Luxemburg characterised Lenin as the representative of the "ultra-centralist" tendency within the Russian revolutionary movement. This criticism was grounded in her view on the relation between the revolutionary mass movement and the party. Luxemburg argued that:

> The fact is that the Social Democracy is not *joined* to the organisation of the proletariat. It is itself the proletariat. And because of this, Social Democratic centralism is essentially different from Blanquist centralism… It is, so to speak, the 'self-centralism' of the advanced sectors of the proletariat. It is the rule of the majority within its own party.
>
> Centralism in the socialist sense is not an absolute thing applicable to any phase whatsoever of the labour movement. It is a *tendency*, which becomes real in proportion to the development and political training acquired by the working masses in the course of their struggle.[2]

This narration, with its emphasis on the voluntary nature of a Communist Party's centralisation, more or less negates the difference between the class and its advanced elements, between the party and the broad revolutionary movement. Though the word Luxemburg uses is "*self*-centralism," in effect it becomes synonymous to "spontaneous." The thinning out of this demarcation is also visible in Trotsky's contestation:

> If the division of labour can be considered as an *organisational principle*, it can only be in a factory, but never in a political party of any kind, still less in ours—is it not obvious to us that the 'principle' of the division of labour is in no way characteristic of the organisation which has

[2] Rosa Luxemburg, *Organisational Problems of Russian Social Democracy*, emphasis in original. https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1904/questions-rsd/ch01.htm

> made it its task to develop the class consciousness of the proletariat?[3]

Lenin did not deny the voluntary nature of party centralisation. It is not imposed, but voluntarily acceded to; consciously taken up by its members keeping the interests of revolution in mind. This is Lenin's concept of voluntary centralisation. Contrary to Luxemburg's "tendency," which must be realised through the course of struggles, for Lenin, the methods of a centralised party, including its division of tasks, is something to be consciously established and trained in from the very beginning. Yet this does not negate the positiveness of revolutionary spontaneity.

To reiterate, Lenin's point of departure was the type of organisation needed to organise and carry out revolution. He arrived at a solution by assessing the concrete situation of the enemy and the people, rather than starting out from some preconceived notion of revolution, or of the proletariat and its development. Thus, during the revolutionary upheaval of 1905, in place of the strictest centralisation and guarded recruitment he had been favouring until then, Lenin argued for forms of organisation capable of incorporating the greatest number of militant working-class masses.[4]

This was not a case of Lenin going against Leninism, it *was* Leninism. In this instance, he was guided by the assessment that the revolutionary zeal of the masses, seen in that situation, would to a large extent make up for their ideological, political weaknesses. His proposal displayed deep faith in the masses and a dialectical grasp of the relation between conscious steps and spontaneity within a revolutionary movement. Without doubt, Leninist centralisation and organisational principles are not some absolutes meant to be implemented "regardless of the stage." Its work division does not abandon the task of raising the consciousness of the whole party membership

[3] Leon Trotsky, *Our Political Tasks—Part 3, Organisational Questions*, emphasis in original. https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1904/tasks/ch04.htm

[4] VI Lenin, *New Tasks and New Forces,* Volume 8, pages 209-220. https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/mar/08.htm

and the widest possible mass.

Did the later day international communist movement lose Lenin's exemplary, dialectical, handling of the vanguard concept and organisational methods he formulated? It would be far more beneficial to pay attention to such differences rather than running after individual traits of leaders as Pearson does. Lenin was concerned about the dangers posed by universalising Bolshevik party statutes, regardless of time and place. In a report to the Communist International (Comintern), Lenin observed that its organisational principles had a strong Russian flavour and doubted whether comrades from other countries would be able to grasp it properly.[5] In those days of haste to rupture from the loose organisational methods of the 2nd International this concern didn't draw attention. Meanwhile, stricter centralisation was demanded of the Russian Communist Party, which was now a ruling party. The iron unity of the party was of critical importance for the very existence of the revolutionary state. This was the context in which the 10th Congress of the Russian party decided to end all groups within the party and their publications, departing from its existent practice. Later it became part of the foundations of communist party organisational principles.

Throughout this period, Lenin, the Russian Party and the Comintern were of the view that a revolutionary advance was imminent in Western Europe. Political developments in various countries testified to this. The immediacy of this situation must certainly have influenced the formulation of organisational principles. However, the revolutionary situation that had been forming dissipated. At that point Lenin drew attention to the need for a thorough evaluation in order to work out future steps in the situation of ebb. But before he could grapple with this he was bedridden by an assassin's bullets and died. It is not known whether the party concept and its organisational principles were among the issues he had in mind for review. At any rate this is not what was seen later. Statutes and methods of

[5] VI Lenin, *Report to the Fourth Congress of the Communist International*, Volume 33, pages 415-432. https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/nov/04b.htm

work adopted in a particular situation were later theorised in a very mechanical manner.

Stalin's concept of monolithic party was prominent among his mechanical errors. This was the model followed by the international communist movement—until it was criticised by Mao. An outlook of worshipping the party as a power that could not be questioned and was always correct was strengthened. The influence of mechanical thinking, which denied internal contradictions and class struggle in socialism, was evident in Stalin's party concept. It was not grasped as a space of active contradictions, as an organic entity which must continually renew its leadership position and relevance in society by grappling with external and internal contradictions. Ideological struggle became formal. Democratic centralism froze into relations of domination and subservience. As could be expected, a difference was seen in this between parties in power and those struggling for it. In the latter case, the necessities of sustaining under enemy suppression compelled greater reliance on the people. Self-criticism, rectification and ideological struggles over such issues livened up the atmosphere in the party. Yet, the constrictions of the monolithic party concept were ever present. Purging of membership gained prominence compared to ideological rectification. So long as the party maintained its Marxist-Leninist orientation this usually meant removal of those who had lost their communist qualities. But even then, ideology took a back seat in the whole process: the organisational aspect stood out.

Mao broke away from this negative tradition and the mechanical thinking underlying it. His was literally a re-construction of the vanguard concept, and it opened the way to a deeper, richer understanding of the proletariat's leading role and the Leninist party. Mao's departure from existent thinking on the party concept can be seen right from the very beginning. His report on the Hunan peasant movement, written in 1927, observed that any revolutionary party failing to give leadership to the insurgent peasantry would be rejected. This statement, that the peasants—seen as backward in

Marxist theory until then—test and determine the revolutionary character of a proletarian party, was nothing but a daring subversion of absolutist thinking on the leading role of the communist party. It provided space to problematise the proletariat's historical leading role and the vanguard concept.

Though other classes and social sections will be important partners in the historical movement to destroy capitalism (i.e. its highest stage of imperialism) they cannot provide leadership. In each instance the issue of liberation is specific—land in the case of landless peasants, caste oppression for *Dalits,* male chauvinism for women, ethnic oppression for *Adivasis*, national oppression for oppressed people, religious persecution for minorities and so on. Being specific they are also partial, in the context of the whole revolutionary project. But this is not the situation of the proletariat. Capitalist bondage is different from earlier exploiting systems like caste-feudalism. It imposes no other compulsion on the workers other than the pangs of hunger. And since, in principle, they are free, there can be no specific liberation suiting them, and so, every form of exploitation and oppression must be ended. Thus the emancipation of the whole of humanity becomes a precondition for the liberation of this class. The leading role of the proletariat derives from this objective social position. It obliges the proletariat to continue the revolution all the way up to realising a world rid of exploitation.

If this Marxist understanding of proletarian leadership is absolutised it would certainly lead to reification.[6] Both the history and present of the international communist movement illustrate how this emerges with mechanical equations, where proletariat = revolution and communist party = vanguard. On the other hand, economist impulses often seen in the upper strata of the proletariat, social passivity engendered by revisionist, reformist politics that strengthen this economism, and changes seen in the nature of labour and workplaces, have given rise to views that abandon the proletarian leadership concept. Carried away in the tide of identity politics, they believe that, in the future, these movements will give leadership to

[6] Sandeepan, Munnaniporali, 131.

social change.

Thus we have the two—reification of the proletariat and the communist party, selfishness that hoists this banner to justify fleeting necessities as common interests, at one end, and the lethargic plea to reduce our sights to the partial, to abandon the noble task of an exploitation free world since it is a mere myth, at the other. Maoism cuts through this vicious circle. The leading role of the proletariat and the vanguard position of its communist party are potentialities contained in historical circumstances. They can only be realised through creative intervention in the historical moment of a specific society. Similar to other phenomena, this too is a unity of opposites. This was the import of Mao's warning in the Hunan Report.

One sees the continuity with this in Mao's observation, made some 50 years later: "the bourgeoisie is within the party itself." He arrived at this conclusion through the experiences of the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union and the Cultural Revolution unleashed in China to prevent it. This is something that cannot be grasped with Stalin's monolithic party concept. The bourgeois presence Mao called attention to was different from the possible infiltration of bourgeois agents and their corruption of party members;—what Lenin and Stalin sought to check through purges. Mao was speaking about a new bourgeoisie. It is the product of residual capitalist production relations such as bourgeois right and the political/ruling, leading role of the communist party in the dictatorship of the proletariat; an inevitable element of socialism. The decisive factor in the struggle against this is the correct ideological-political line dealing with the multiple tasks of continuing the revolution and its further development. If a revisionist line seizes leadership the bourgeoisie will become dominant in the party. The colour of the party and the state will change.

This poses yet another dialectic of the communist party's position as vanguard. The main source of the potential hazard we saw above does not lie with external influences. It is contained in the revolution it led, in the society thus created; in other words, in the

emergent unity of opposites brought forth by its successful venture of being a vanguard. This potential is the mirror opposite of leading the advance to communism. Which of them will be realised in a given socialist society is a matter to be settled by the class struggle taking place within the party and society in each concrete historical moment. Grasping the party as a unity of opposites—this is the point of rupture to firmly establish the Maoist party concept in both theory and practice.

Taking lessons from the Chinese revolution and the international communist movement, Mao elabourated a number of propositions on the party. One theme consistently stressed throughout is that of firmly building up the communist consciousness of serving the people, by checking attitudes of superiority in the relations between the party and the people, and leadership and ranks. This does not deny the role or importance of leadership. Mao was contradicting an outlook that absolutised leadership, and made the masses and ranks into disciples, passive instruments. He reminded communists that no matter how necessary cadres are, it is the masses who carry things out, and therefore it wouldn't do to exaggerate the role of cadres. He persists with this in the relation between the central committee and lower committees and that between the socialist state and the people. In the absence of information from the lower levels, the central leadership cannot arrive at correct decisions. At times a solution may be arrived at in the lower level itself, in which case the task of the central committee is to propagate this throughout the country. Such observations of Mao demolish any idea of infallible leadership. They also help in bringing out the relation between the organisational principle of democratic centralism and the Marxist theory of knowledge. Mao pointed out that the struggle against the bourgeoisie was not the only element in class struggle under socialism. It included contradictions between the socialist state and people, and between the party and the people. Already, in the 1950s he warned that the people would teach those who thought they could lord over them, now that power was seized. He advocated for the

right of the people to strike and protest, saying that the communist party needed to learn a lesson.[7]

What is striking here is the importance he placed on struggle from below, the spontaneous initiative of the people. This grasp of the dialectical relation between conscious intervention from above and spontaneous pressure from below, this Leninist understanding lost by the international communist movement in the interregnum, was not just retaken by Mao. He took it to a new height by applying it in the Cultural Revolution, in the struggle against the danger of capitalist restoration. Mao thus developed the party concept and established it on new foundations; not on some individual behavioural traits, but solid ideological-political principles.

To what extent could the Communist Party of China led by Mao imbibe this newness? This is a relevant question. It serves as an entry for assessing the extent to which the international movement that emerged in the 1960s inspired by Mao Zedong Thought, or the Maoists who laid claim to deeper clarity in the 1990s, has incorporated and actualised the Maoist party concept. The Chinese party was forged in the Cominternist mould. That mould, as well as the CPC's background of having functioned at length with its methods and style, must be kept in mind while seeking an answer to our question. As we noted, Mao had started to break away from this model from the very beginning. But his new approach would really be established only through the Cultural Revolution. In fact, Mao's teachings on the party were systematically compiled only in 1974, in the Shanghai text, *A Basic Understanding of the Communist Party of China.* (Three years later one of the first acts of the capitalist-roaders who usurped power was banning this book!) One can then conclude that the Chinese party was one undergoing reforging in accordance with the Maoist approach, yet with a lot of unevenness in this very process. In fact this new approach had developed by

[7] Mao Zedong, "Combat Bourgeois Ideas in the Party," "Speech at the Second Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China," Volume 5, *Selected Works*. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_32.htm https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_56.htm

leading revolutionary practice, all the while ingesting new insights from its experiences.

But it wouldn't be enough to mark this limit imposed by conditions. There is also the matter of an incomplete rupture from the Comintern approach. Among them, the cult built up around Mao deserves special attention. This business of personality cult was initiated by Stalin in total opposition to Lenin's outlook. When the subsequent Soviet leader Khrushchev prepared ideological grounds for capitalist restoration by negating Stalin totally, under the guise of rejecting this cult, Mao took up the defence of Stalin. But this was done with Marxist criticism of Stalin's errors, differentiating between what was to be adopted and what rejected. We need to think over whether this was complete. Personality cults can never be justified in Marxism. But instead of totally rejecting them, Mao limited himself to criticising their extreme manifestations. Though some seek to justify this by appealing to the complex situation of the class struggle in China, it is unacceptable in principle itself. The issue is not the extent of praise, or even whether somebody deserves to be praised. Such cults foster a consciousness of infallibility of an individual, a leadership and indirectly of that party; something rejected by the Maoist party concept but seen in the Chinese party's adjective, "always correct." Contemporary examples of Maoist parties justifying their leadership cults by citing Mao, draw attention to the need to achieve clarity in this matter.

In general, how far have the Maoists succeeded in rupturing from the Cominternist party concept? How Maoist are the parties they are building up and leading? Though no one would theorise, and thus legitimise, a shift from staying with the masses and serving them, to lording over them, this can already be seen in a number of instances. Blind faith in the party in the place of party loyalty centred on politics, blind belief in the infallibility of the leadership and cult worship, intolerance of opposition and criticism, pragmatism that sanctions any method if they are "for the party and revolution"—such Cominternist influences are commonly seen in meth-

ods of work and approach. The term Cominternist is used because these were not errors of Stalin alone. Moreover, they contain problems of a whole period in the history of the international communist movement. We must add, these were problems of outlook *and* growth, because it was a time in which communist ideology was spread throughout the world, formation of communist parties was promoted, and a truly international revolutionary proletarian movement was given form. One of the great leaps achieved by Maoism is its rupture from bad traditions of the Comintern period, without in the least minimising its positive role. This must be further deepened. Today's Maoist parties are, without doubt, continuators of yesteryear communist parties. But their foundations must be the heights attained by Maoism in the vanguard concept, not the outlook or methods of their past.



Re-Reading Marx on British India

Much has already been written about Marx's writings on India. Is there need for more? Going by the Introduction and Appreciation seen in a new collection, the answer can only be an emphatic yes.[1]

Given the history of invasions of the Indian sub-continent by various forces and the empires they established, Marx raised an important question—what distinguished British rule from them? His answer was the civilisational "superiority" of British colonialism.[2] Superiority is a loaded term. Our contemporary critical sense, enriched by the insights of Edward Said and many others, calls for a closer look. But that cannot negate historical progress and the superior capabilities of any new social system compared to earlier ones; in all respects, including the appropriation of their knowledge. This was as true of the incorporation of tribal societies in the South Asian sub-continent into caste-feudalism as it was for colonialism. The "superior civilisation" of the British was evidently a product of its capitalist nature and in this respect the decisive difference noted by Marx, its inflicting a "misery of an essentially different and infinitely more intensive kind" can't be denied.[3] This refutes the charge of

[1] *Karl Marx on India (KMI)*, ed. Iqbal Hussein, Introduction—Irfan Habib, Aligarh Historians Society with Tulika Books, New Delhi, 2006.
[2] "The Future Results of The British Rule in India ," from *The First War of Independence (FWI)*, Progress Publishers, Moscow , 1978, page 30. https://marxists.catbull.com/archive/marx/works/1853/07/22.htm
[3] "The British Rule in India," *FWI*, page 14. Emphasis added. https://marxists.catbull.com/archive/marx/works/1853/06/25.htm
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Orientalism and exposes a basic flaw in this whole stream of reading. But that can't be a plea for avoiding critical reading itself.

The fashion of blaming the faulty and biased source materials Marx had to rely on and passing by an examination of how he used them or how they influenced him is certainly not Marxian. Marx was critical in his use that material, but not completely so. This was influenced not only by the scarcity of additional inputs but also by the Enlightmentalist milieu of that period. Explicit traces of this influence can be seen, for example, in Marx's views on the "Hindu" religion, where he correctly criticises it for subjecting humans (the "sovereign of nature") to a brutalising worship of nature.[4] But this characterisation of "Hindu" (properly speaking *Brahmanic*) religion also does great injustice to its sophisticated philosophical thinking. Besides, it misses the intriguing paradox of the existence of this high philosophy along with animism in a single belief system. We can attribute this to faulty information. But can the supposedly sovereign role assigned to human beings avoid critical correction? It even violates Marx's own views on the nature-human metabolism.[5] Yet another example is where he reasons that the state's running of irrigation systems in Asian countries, unlike private enterprise in medieval Europe, was necessitated by "civilisation… (being) …too low to call into life voluntary association" apart from the vastness of territory.[6] Low in civilisation, yet high enough to develop technology and organisation for such enterprises?

So what does this say about "historical superiority?" We need to be critical about the "absolute" quality usually vested in it. It has to be tempered with the recognition that what is surpassed as inferior may well contain some superior aspects. The relativeness of "superiority" to the future as well as to the past, given by class, gender, racial and various other biases accompanying it, must never be ignored.

[4] Ibid., page 18.
[5] "It [the labour process] is the universal condition for the metabolic interaction between man and nature, the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence." quoted in *Marx's Ecology—Materialism and Nature*, James Bellamy Foster, Cornerstone Publications, Kharagpur, 2001, page 157.
[6] *The British Rule in India*, page 15.

Even a cursory reading of Marx's writings in the light of such new sensibilities would call for acknowledging such drawbacks. But sadly enough, this collection, edited by noted Marxist historians, has chosen to remain silent. Even worse, we see Prabhat Patnaik declaring those articles to be "a real classic on Indian history!"[7]

Some of Marx's views, based on faulty sources, such as the concept of an Asiatic mode of production based on supposedly stagnant village communities and a despotic state, have been abandoned by most Marxist historians. The fact that even the "hereditary divisions of labour" congealed in the caste order (correctly seen by Marx as a decisive impediment to progress) was itself never immobile, is now widely accepted.[8] Similarly his characterisation of hand spinning and hand weaving as the pivots of village society, his view on the absence of private property in land, of the paralysis of productive forces for want of means of transport, of state functions as merely plunder and public works (irrigation) also stand corrected. Marx didn't know of the Harappan civilisation, of the Mauryan or Guptan empires (by no means foreign), of the productive tasks prescribed for the state by Kautilya and its role in the expansion of settled agriculture or of the locally developed technologies in agriculture and crafts. But we do and must therefore call into question Marx's opinion that British colonialism effected the "greatest and… only social revolution…" in the sub-continent.[9] To give it the halo of a "classic" view of our history would be making a laughingstock of Marxism and a departure from the creative advances made in applying it to the study of this sub-continent. D. D. Kosambi, a pioneer in this matter, observed, "The advance of agrarian village economy over tribal country is the first great social revolution in India: the change from an aggregate of gentes to a society."[10] Further:

[7] "Appreciation: The Other Marx," Prabhat Patnaik, *KMI*, page lv.
[8] *Combined Methods in Indology and Other Writings (CMIW)*, D. D. Kosambi, ed. Brajadadulal Chattopadhyaya, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002, page 298; *Capital and Labour Redfined—India and the Third World*, Amiya Kumar Bagchi, Tulika Books, New Delhi, 2002, page 143.
[9] *The British Rule in India* page 17.
[10] Kosambi, page 308.

> Marx noted only the backwardness engendered by the caste system, the grip of the most disgusting rituals… which sickeningly degraded man. On the other hand, without these superstitions assimilated by Brahmanism at need… tribal society could not have been converted peacefully to new forms nor free savages changed into helpless serfs…[11]

Despite Kosambi's mistaken subscription to Marx's view that modern industry introduced by colonialism would dissolve caste,[12] his erroneous characterisation of the incorporation of tribal societies through the caste order as a more or less peaceful process and his overlooking the rituals and superstitions intrinsic to Brahmanism—these insights stand as valuable stepping stones.

There is another matter. Take Prabhat Patnaik's trumpeting the "lucidity of (Marx's) exposition of the dialectics of the colonial impact." Yes, Marx correctly drew attention to the dual role of British rule, its destructive and regenerative functions. But a careful reading of what he wrote, aided by knowledge of the actual course of developments, shows that his optimism about the regenerative role of colonialism was misplaced. Moreover, there was also the problem of viewing the prospects of colonial India through the prism of Western capitalism's course of development. One can summarise Marx's views as follows: through the introduction of modern industry by way of the railways and of private property in land through the *zamindari* and *ryotwari* settlements, by the political unity enforced through colonial rule, formation of a native army and the growth of a new class "endowed with requirements for government and imbued with European science," along with the introduction of a "free press," the British were unconsciously laying the material foundations of Western (capitalist) society. If we leave out the specificities, what stands out is a projection of an inevitable development of capitalism, more

[11] Ibid., page 309.

[12] This actually contradicts Kosambi's own acknowledgement of caste as a means of control over the exploited.

or less along the pattern witnessed in Western Europe. Furthermore, the role of force exerted by colonial political power was seen only in its transformative aspect, in breaking down the old framework.[13] Its role as a barrier to the development of capitalism, as a protector of the old order, suitably reformed, was missed. So too was the distinct nature of the capitalism fostered by colonialism. It is surprising that Prabhat Patnaik ignored this in his "Appreciation," centred as it is on an exposition of "a capitalist mode located in the midst of a subjugated pre-capitalist hinterland" as a necessary condition of imperialism, and by Irfan Habib in his Introduction. We will come back to this later. Let us first examine the central premise Marx drew on to arrive at his conclusions on the role of colonial political power and the dialectics of colonial rule.

This was the destruction of handicraft, particularly of the weaving industry, by British commodity trade and the introduction of modern industry; the dissolution of the existent natural economy. But the insight of later historical research shows that the period preceding the consolidation of British colonial rule saw large growth in the weaving sector and in cotton cultivation. It was stimulated by the new, external demand created by colonial trade as well as by a growth of the internal market. Some of the salient features of this development were the growing separation of handicrafts from agriculture, greater division of labour and specialisation in the weaving sector, rapid growth of the weaver population in towns and the emergence of new weaver settlements.[14] In view of this new knowledge shouldn't a Marxist reflect on how, when and why the population of Dacca swelled to 1, 50, 000, largely weavers, instead of remaining fixated on its drastic decline to 20,000 under British colonialism?

[13] *Capital*, Volume 1, Karl Marx, Progress Publishers, Moscow , 1974, chapter 31, page 703. Marx points to the employment of the power of the state in the colonial system, "…to hasten, hot-house fashion, the process of the transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode, and to shorten the transition." https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch31.htm

[14] *India—Changing Economic Structure in the Sixteenth-Eighteenth Centuries, Outline History of Crafts and Trade*, Alexander I. Tchithcerov, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 1998, pages 53,63-64, 74, 104 and 136.

Evidently the dialectics of colonial intrusion was far more complex than the destruction/regeneration noted by Marx. Too much of indigenous capitalist development cannot be read into the facts recorded above. But it was also not a mere offshoot of colonial trade. At least in some parts of the sub-continent the potential for capitalist development was emerging even before this. British colonialism did not impose its rule over a stagnant sub-continent. Nor were the conditions it met those of classical caste-feudalism.[15] Some regions in the sub-continent were already transitional. Moreover, there is no reason to insist that capitalism must develop only through internal stimuli. The case of Japan is illustrative. There, the forceful entry of Western colonial powers triggered an internal dynamic leading to the growth of capitalism. More importantly, the later loss of interest in Japan on the part of the colonial powers, drawn to the riches of China, gave it the favourable circumstance of avoiding colonial domination and thus allowed it to take the path of capitalist development. This brings us back to the role of political power.

It wouldn't be off the mark to assume that indigenous capitalism could have developed in the Indian sub-continent under the strong stimuli of colonial and other trade. For example, Tipu's Mysuru and, to a lesser extent, Thiruvithaamkoor under Marthanda Varma could have taken the trajectory of a development of capitalism from above, through state intervention, if they had remained independent.[16] The consolidation of British colonial power was certainly one of the decisive factors preventing it. This implies a qualification of the regenerative role of British rule and draws attention to the dual role of colonial power. In the matter of regeneration, or the growth of capitalism, it was both transformative as well as suppressive. The various aspects noted by Marx no doubt led to the growth of capitalism, but of a certain type. It was shaped and warped by colonial interests, and this included the sustenance and regeneration of many elements of caste-feudalism. This was later recognised by the

[15] *Bagchi*, page 143.

[16] Mysuru and Thiruvithamkoor were two kingdoms situated in the southern peninsula of the sub-continent that were undergoing transformation in land relations and governance around this period.

3rd International under Lenin and incorporated in its views on the colonial question.[17] But a more precise characterisation of this capitalism and the class engendered by it came through Mao Zedong's sparse but path-breaking illumination on bureaucrat capitalism and class analysis of the comprador-bureaucrat bourgeoisie in China. It revealed a capitalism fostered by imperialism and intertwined with feudalism. These rich analytical tools have been totally ignored by most of the Marxist theoreticians in India.

Prabhat Patnaik and Irfan Habib are definitely of the view that colonialism, particularly imperialism, has obstructed the growth of capitalism. In his Introduction Irfan Habib records this, but with a justification for Marx who "…naturally could not have foreseen how Britain would now use administrative measures to throttle India's industrial development."[18] But why was this so natural? If the mill owners of Britain had blocked the sale of Indian textiles in an earlier period, they could surely be expected to employ colonial power to block the growth of a competing capitalism in the colony. Why did Marx miss this? The answer once again lies in his high expectations about the regenerative role of British rule and the consequent growth of capitalism in British India. He related this to the necessity felt by ascendant British industrial interests to create fresh productive powers after destroying local industry. This came about precisely because they found that the power to consume their goods (in British India) was contracting to the lowest possible point. Hence the conclusion, "You cannot continue to inundate a country with your manufactures, unless you enable it to give you some produce in return."[19] Colonial power certainly did this enabling, but in a manner very different from what Marx expected. For a long period, the development of productive forces was mainly in the direction of ensuring raw materials for the industrial growth of Britain. The later growth of local industry was again a "development of underdevelopment."

What interests us here is the contradiction seen in Prabhat Pat-

[17] *Colonial Theses*, 6th Congress Report of the Communist International.
[18] *Introduction: Marx's Perception of India*, Irfan Habib, KMI, page li.
[19] *The East India Company—Its History and Results*, Karl Marx, FWI, page 27. https://marxists.catbull.com/archive/marx/works/1853/07/11.htm

naik's and Irfan Habib's arguments. They have used the occasion of bringing out this new collection to introduce and argue the thesis that the exploitation of the colonies was not merely a matter of primary accumulation. There is a certain "division of labour" here. Patnaik visualises Marx's articles as a window to enter into the thesis, while Irfan Habib devotes his effort to substantiate Marx's prophecies, with some inevitable amendments. But we will be justified in treating them as one because both of them accept the central argument of Marx's articles—capitalist growth induced in a stagnant society through the agency of colonial rule. Prabhat Patnaik has argued that Marx's articles:

> …see capitalism, necessarily, within a wider setting, not in isolation but as existing amidst and coupled to pre-capitalist formations… which have been transformed by capitalism in accordance with its own needs, through political domination in the form of colonial rule.[20]

The question is about the "transformation," its nature and extent. As we saw earlier, Marx envisioned a development of capitalism due to the regenerative role of British rule. This was the basis for assuming a basic, if not total, transformation of pre-capitalist society in its future course under colonial rule. Irfan Habib, favoured by Patnaik for his "illuminating Introduction," would have us believe that Marx's predictions on a bourgeois class emerging and taking the lead of a national movement,[21] and industry dissolving hereditary divisions of labour upon which the Indian castes rest, have been vindicated.[22] He does recognise contradictions thrown up by British rule. But this is linked to his view that "…the genesis of modern

[20] *Patnaik*, page lviii.
[21] "… the formation of the Indian National Congress, from which event the formal history of the Indian national movement begins.," "… followed till the finale of 1947 contained much that should have gratified him, for it was all according to the perspective he had outlined in 1853.," *Habib*, page lii.
[22] "This was confident prophecy; the Indian working class has largely fulfilled it…," ibid., page lii.

elements in India under the aegis of British dominance could not create any lasting groundwork for collabouration between the new classes and the British rulers…"[23] What he has in mind is not the proletariat or the new middle class but the bourgeoisie itself. He seeks to substantiate this through Marx's observations on the poor response from "Indian Capitalists" to the East India Company's loan. This is obviously a case of reading too much into the temporary hesitation shown by the local rich in the immediate context of the 1857 revolt. If we accept these views then the "finale of 1947" produced an independent country led by a bourgeoisie strong enough to throw off the yoke of imperialist colonialism. But if that were true then there can be no reason to argue that a colonial relation, in one or another form, the exploitation of countries retained in backwardness whatever its degree may be, is "necessary" for capitalism or its highest stage of imperialism. On the contrary, if such exploitation is not merely a matter of primary accumulation, if it is a "necessity" of capitalism and imperialism, we must then abandon the notion of gaining independence in 1947 and accept the bitter fact of a continued, though now semi-colonial, dependence. The reality of neo-colonialism must be acknowledged.

Marx noted:

The world-market itself forms the basis for this mode of production. On the other hand, the immanent necessity of this mode of production to produce on an ever-enlarged scale tends to extend the world-market continually…[24]

The greater part of this world market of capitalism was the colonies, and at present the semi-colonial countries. The exploitation and plunder of the colonies were crucial for the primary accumulation of the emerging capitalist mode. However, this was not just a matter of primary accumulation. It has also played a crucial role in the growth of capitalism into imperialism and its continued sustenance. This recognition does not eliminate the primary internal

[23] Ibid., page lii.
[24] *Capital*, Volume 3, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1974, page 333. https://marxists.catbull.com/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/index.htm

dynamics in the emergence of either capitalism or imperialism in the West, because a mode of production develops only where the conditions for it have taken shape. Neither does it shift the locus of exploitation to exchange relations instead of at the basic level of production. The issue for us is the conditions created and enforced by colonial rule or the conditions sanctioned and imposed by imperialism in the post-colonial period. The continuous expansion of the world market necessitated by the capitalist mode of production in the metropolis demands the development of productive forces in the colonies. But the extent of this development depends on the exploitative needs of capital in the centre. This makes subordination of the peripheries a must and also determines its nature. It is no doubt influenced and shaped by a number of other factors including class struggle and contradictions among world powers. But the element of oppression and disarticulation, which also contains the sustenance of semi-feudalism, is a constant. These conditions ruled out, and still rule out, the development of capitalism in these countries along the trajectory Marx projected.

This takes us beyond Marx's articles on British India and brings us to re-examining and developing the commonly accepted Leninist theory of imperialism. It is generally understood that the retrogressive role of colonialism was mainly a product of the shift of capitalism from progressive free trade to a reactionary monopoly phase. This does not accord with historical facts. The disarticulation of colonial economies and regeneration of feudal relations took place right from the very beginning of colonial rule, during the phase of competitive capitalism. It was always a part of its transformative role. Therefore what is needed is a synthesis, with Lenin's theory of imperialism at its core, but critically integrating the views of Rosa Luxemburg and of the world system school who have tried to address and situate the sustained role of the colonial exploitative relation in the capitalist system. Such a synthesis must also necessarily include Mao Zedong's contributions, because they shed light on the particularities of capitalism promoted under the colonial relation, or at present under the

form of neo-colonialism.

Sadly enough, the thesis sought to be advanced, explicitly by Prabhat Patnaik and implicitly by Irfan Habib, is nowhere near this. Standing as they do on a political position that denies the colonial relation (the continued imperialist domination and control) shackling countries like India, Patnaik's argument about "…the preservation of a subjugated and degraded pre-capitalist or semi-capitalist sector, constituting the (necessary) environment within which the capitalist sector functions…" falls lame.[25] It amounts to nothing more than smuggling in elements of the world system school's argument in order to square the all too visible signs of imperialist domination and servility of the ruling classes (including among those they consider as communists) with their political positions on an "independent" India and an "independent" big bourgeoisie. There could of course be another take of this thesis whereby big industry in India is identified as the "capitalist sector." But this would only mean a shifting of the problem and miserably fail to address the nature of India's relation to the imperialist centres.

To come back to Marx's writings, the "Introduction" of Irfan Habib and "Appreciation" of Prabhat Patnaik are good lessons in how not to read Marx. Their concern to defend Marx is defeated by the glossing over of errors in recording history as well as in judgement. It is also marked by what can politely be put as convenient reading. Thus Irfan Habib declares that "Marx's thesis of the union of agriculture and craft… and an immutable division of labour… as the twin pillars of the village economy, remains of lasting value."[26] What Marx wrote about is the combination of two circumstances bringing about a particular type of social system, the "so-called village system." These were the central despotic state charged with taking care of public works like irrigation and the dispersed existence of the populace agglomerated in small centres by the domestic union of agricultural and manufacturing pursuits.[27] This was supposed to be

[25] *Patnaik*, page lxiii.
[26] *Habib*, page xxxv.
[27] *British Rule in India*, op. Cit., page 16.

the characteristics of the Asiatic mode of production. If the mode as such is abandoned and the erroneous characterisation of the role of the central state is corrected, what really remains of "lasting value?" The domestic union of agriculture and manufacture was something commonly seen in all medieval societies, East or West. What is unique is the "hereditary division of labour"—caste. It is to Marx's lasting credit that he drew attention to this feature and projected it as the decisive impediment to "Indian progress and Indian power." How far has this insight, this truly unique feature, been taken up? How do we explain the hard fact that despite Marx's acknowledging caste as a "division of labour," Ambedkar's insight on caste as also a "division of labourers" and Kosambi's pioneering work on the role of the caste order in the incorporation of tribal societies into feudalism, the tradition in Indian Marxist thought and political practice has been to see it as a matter of the superstructure? How far can all these questions be addressed by those who declare that the Indian working class has more or less dissolved caste, even when all facts of their life point to the opposite?

Despite all the limitations and even errors in Marx's writings, what stands out is his effort to apply materialism in the study of the history and society of the Indian sub-continent, paying keen attention to what he then knew as its particularities. It is this approach that needs to be distilled and applied in our historical studies. And it should be tempered with Kosambi's observation:

> India is not a mathematical point but a very large country, a sub-continent with the utmost diversity of natural environment, language, historical course of development. Neither in the means of production nor in the stages of social development was there overall homogeneity in the oldest times. Centuries must be allowed to pass before comparable stages of productive and social relationships may be established between the Indus valley, Bengal and Malabar. Even then important

difference remain which make periodisation for India as a whole almost impossible, except with the broadest margins.[28]



[28] *Kosambi*, page 50.

The Politics of Liberation

The very fact that the continued existence of caste oppression in Keralam has to be reasserted today is a good indication of these times. Our rulers have yet to come out with claims of having ended the evils of caste. Yet the way is being opened for them by some intellectuals who can get an audience, since they are widely regarded as progressives. For the time being this argument is limited to the *Dalit* question. It is really impossible to present such an argument today about the *Adivasi* question, given the repeated reports of their deprivation and oppression. But we can expect something similar soon on the women question, with a roll out of data on how they have been "empowered" through posts in the local bodies and self-help groups. More importantly, more than just the *Dalit* question, the views introduced by these intellectuals represent a plea that specific issues of social oppression are insignificant when compared to getting on with the "progress" we have already made. In its essence it is similar to the justifications trotted out for globalisation, where the need to catch up and move ahead in the 21st century was deployed to curb resistance and criticism of the devastation it caused.

Social Oppression and Discrimination

As we stated in the beginning, there is a need today to reassert the facts of social oppression. Apart from some recounting of facts, the very method used for assessment must be settled. Those who

Translated from Malayalam. First presented as a seminar paper in 2004, an abridged version was later published in Mathrubhumi Weekly.

demand a "rethink" on caste reservation base it on a comparison of *Dalits* in Keralam with those in other parts of the country. They state that since Keralam has progressed far in social indicators and awareness, it would be retrogressive to speak of caste oppression here. But this very argument contradicts their conclusion. If Keralam has progressed, then the logical thing to do is to compare the situation of *Dalits* with other castes in Keralam as a whole. And if we do this, we can easily see that they stand well below the average in assets, education and employment opportunities while their social vulnerability is quite high. This is true for *Adivasis* and women too.

The *Dalit* castes were traditionally linked to agriculture. Though *Dalits* are no longer a majority in the agrarian work force, caste-wise they still are the largest section. Yet 95% are practically landless. All that the land reforms gave them was homestead land. By doing this, it also effectively excluded them from any further right to land, other than surplus land. Even worse, it has instilled the thinking that they no longer have any right to the land of landlords and others, since their private property is sanctified by land reform legislations. Various studies show that the *Dalits* remain at the bottommost level of society. In education, though schooling is common, their dropout rate is higher than average. It increases at each higher level. Earlier, most of those continuing used to reach at least the pre-degree (plus 2) level. Now this is also falling as the expenses of education go up and their due stipends are kept pending. Though a lot is made of bank loans and government support for those getting admission in the so-called self-reliant colleges, the hard truth was brought out by the horror of Rajani's suicide: a *Dalit* student who had somehow managed to get into a private engineering college but found it impossible to continue because of the cost. As for employment, except for the few who have gotten into government service or public enterprises through reservation, the vast majority are daily wage workers in agriculture, loading, construction, road laying, workshops, commercial establishments and in the growing sectors of security and home nursing. It would take a lot of social blindness

to deny that this miserable condition is a result of caste oppression.

At the other end, *Savarna* castes (of all religions) still have a share in assets, particularly land, far disproportionate to their share in population. Though the *Ezhavas* have gained, it is limited to the upper section. The majority still remain land poor.[1] In the bureaucracy, the top posts are still manned by *Savarnas*. As reported by the Narendran Commission, among the "backward castes" only the *Ezhavas* have managed to get their due share in reservation. Christian *Dalits*, Muslims, and *Dhivaras*, in that order, are way behind. Even among *Dalits* and *Adivasis* only a few castes and tribes have gained through reservation. In a replication of the caste order, there is over-representation of a high degree in the lowest manual jobs (category D) and under-representation at the top level.

Caste oppression and discrimination continue to exist at the level of social intercourse. While explicit forms, like untouchability and forced menial labour, are uncommon, they have by no means ended. They still exist in certain regions of Kasaragod and Palakkad districts.[2] Caste severely restricts social intercourse, whether it is personal or neighbourhood friendships and relations, throughout this so-called enlightened State. While inter-caste marriages have increased they still face family and social opposition. C. Ayyappan observes:

> Today caste is subtle, complex, invisible and extremely anti-human. There is no difficulty in walking on public streets, entering temples or throwing money into the temple hundi. But caste becomes decisive when sharing cooked food, seeking out a mate from the opposite sex and sharing power.[3]

[1] See pages 73-76, *Bhoomi, Jati, Bandhanam*, Ajith, Kanal Publications, Kochi, 2002.

[2] Incidences of *Dalits* being refused services of barbers under threat from *Savarnas* was recently reported by the media, full sixteen years after writing this essay. This takes place in Idukki district. The furious protests that broke out finally forced the authorities to take some ameliorative steps.

[3] "Vibhavasheshiyude Vipaniyum Kachavadavum," C. Ayyappan, in *Dalithpathakal*, ed. Bobby Thomas, Sign Books, Thiruvanathapuram, 2006.

In culture, traditional *Dalit* expressions are treated as exhibits but never considered as important contributors to the Malayalee's cultural progress. The dominant view in folklore studies places such expressions as imitations of *Brahmanic* forms, quite in keeping with the inverted logic of the Natya Sasthra.[4] Incidents of physical oppression are not that uncommon, though often widely unreported or presented in a manner where the caste dimension is covered up. Police hounding of *Dalit* youth is quite the norm in areas where the *Dalit* population is concentrated.

The situation of the *Adivasis* is even worse. Historically, roughly 40% of the *Adivasis* were landless *adiyalars* or food gatherers. The rest were peasants with their own land. But this has changed and the number of landless has increased. This deterioration started with the plantation economy introduced by colonialism. It is continued by Malayalee ethnic oppression. The viciousness of this is sharply seen in the way the *Adivasis* were (and are) denied even their legal land rights by the UDF, LDF and the courts, not to speak of its forcible seizure by Malayalee migrants. Though some partial relief has been obtained through the *Adivasi* land struggles, the problem remains. Apart from this economic deprivation, *Adivasis* face cultural oppression and discrimination in various forms. Their cultures face extinction and are being reduced to mere museum objects. While national minorities in Keralam like the Tamilians and Kannadigas enjoy the right to be educated in their mother tongue, *Adivasi* children are forced to study in Malayalam medium. This is one major reason for the heavy dropout rate among *Adivasi* children. This cultural imposition is justified by false science that declares all *Adivasi* languages to be dialects of Malayalam. Over the years this will lead to the extinction of these languages and their rich vocal literature.[5]

[4] Bharata Muni's Natya Shastra theorised that all forms of art and culture originated from the gods of Brahmanism, whereas his very systematisation of the arts is clearly a case of selective synthesis from the diverse tribal forms existing in different regions of the South Asian sub-continent. I am indebted to late comrade Kardam Bhatt (Vikas) for this insight.

[5] In recent years some steps are being taken to promote primary education in Adivasi tongues.

As a social section, *Adivasi* women are the most vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Nothing is effectively done to tackle this since its roots in Malayalee ethnic oppression and cultural stereotyping of the *Adivasis* are not identified. As for violence against Adivasis, the truth of so-called Malayalee tolerance was seen in the post-Muthanga "*Adivasi* hunt" in Wayanad in 2003. Any *Adivasi* was open game to be rounded up in streets or pulled off buses and attacked. Let us also not forget that though this was a concentrated expression of social violence against *Adivasis*, it is by no means an isolated one. Every year, on an average, nearly 40-50 *Adivasis*, mainly women, are killed, with Attapadi in the Palakkad district leading.

Coming to the status of women, it is true that their condition is better in sectors like health and education compared to other States. The earlier forms of naked oppression have more or less been eliminated. But on a closer look, various examples of sharp gender discrimination can be seen. With the strengthening of patrilineage, the desire to have boys has increased. The share of girls in the sex ratio among children below six years old has gone down a considerable extent. Female foeticide has arrived in Keralam as well. Though girls are well represented in education, they are still rare in technical fields. Higher education is still gender stereotyped. This stereotyping begins from childhood. Though women of the bottommost classes and castes enjoy greater freedom, male chauvinism is rampant in all sections of society. In recent years, sexual attacks and exploitation of women have taken a quantum jump.[6]

The majority of the working women in Keralam are employed in low paid daily wage work, in sectors like coir, cashew, beedi, handloom weaving, seafood processing, shops and cleaning. The growing share of fallow land and decline in paddy cultivation has led to a steep fall in their employment opportunities. In modern sectors also, such as electronics, textiles and hospitals, most of them are casual workers with low wages and poor service conditions.

[6] "Kudumbam, sadacharam, sthreevimochanam," paper presented by the Viplava Sthreevadi Prasthanam in a seminar held on the occasion of its 1st State Conference held in 2005.

Some Lessons from the Past

To understand the dimensions of continuing social oppression and discrimination in contemporary Keralam we must take a critical look at what is called the renaissance or modernisation of the early 20th century. The social ferment of the early 20th century is often treated as an example of capitalist renaissance which broke down age old caste-feudal society and modernised Keralam. A variant of this theme accepts that feudalism has ended and what we have now is a democratic society, though caste still remains. At the other end, particularly today, when the evils of the past revisit and remind us that they are still alive and kicking, that period of transformation is mainly dismissed as a gross betrayal. What is common to all these views is their failure to situate those political, social and economic movements in the concreteness of that historical period, namely colonialism. Imperialism in the form of colonialism did indeed transform caste-feudalism. But it was not interested in destroying it. The specific type of capitalism, bureaucrat capitalism, it introduced was indissolubly linked to caste-feudalism. In other words colonial modernisation had a duel, contradictory role. "While colonial modernity swept away many cobwebs of the past, it also polished up and restored a number of antiquated stuff."[7] All the old social movements that emerged in that context were afflicted by this duality. They tried to seize the opportunities provided by colonial modernisation even while they internalised the limits imposed by that very social process. Within this we must distinguish between two broad streams, which may be broadly termed as the *Savarna* and *Avarna* streams.

The *Savarna* stream too had its share in democratisation. But the oppressor status of the *Savarnas* did not demand anything more than a reform of rituals, relations and institutions, including family, that hampered the traditional rich and emerging middle class from availing of the new opportunities offered by colonial transformation. Beyond that, caste was not a burden but a useful social relation

[7] *Boomi, Jathi, Bandhanam*, op. cit., page 46.

for their advance. On the contrary, the *Avarna* stream could not but challenge the caste order itself. Any gain in class status would become of social value only through this. The predicament of Alummoottil Channaar, the highest taxpayer in Thiruvithamkoor, was a sharp revelation of the tasks confronting the *Avarna* stream. He was able to employ a *Nair* (*Savarna*) driver for his car. Yet when passing a temple he was forced to get out and take a walking detour. Meanwhile, his driver, unpolluted, would drive right across to wait for his employer. This difference was also manifested in the manner in which the two streams posed their demands. For the *Savarna* stream it was a matter of individual and class demands against caste. But the *Avarna* stream could not but raise caste demands to satisfy similar needs. At the superficial level, the former could thus lay claim on contemporariness, modernity and even progressiveness. This, despite being limited to reforms within the traditional caste order. Contrary to this, the *Avarna* stream operating through the historically outmoded category of caste seemed to be stuck in the old rut, even though it was really addressing the task of radical democratisation. Of course we must keep in mind that what is outlined above is the objective dynamics of these two streams, whatever may have been the subjective perceptions.

Why is it necessary to stress this demarcation? First, though Narayana Guru, Sahodaran Ayyappan, more recently Ayyankali and Poykayil Johannan (Kumaraguru) and rarely Vaikunta Swami, are held up as standard bearers of Keralam's modernisation by official historians, they are grouped with various *Savarna* reformers, thereby diluting their true role. Second, the formal approach that fails to link democratisation with the struggle against caste is still influential and is still able to maintain its pretence of progressiveness. The fact that people can easily pass off the opinion that caste remains part of social discourse only because some intellectuals keep writing about it or the fact that the casteist outlook of Sriraman's short story "Duravastha Veendum Vannappol" is being presented as a glowing example of class stand and a milestone in progressive literature,

reminds us of this. Moreover, distinguishing between the *Savarna* and *Avarna* streams is also necessary to properly assess the role of the communist movement in the making of contemporary Keralam. But before we deal with that, let us first examine the limits of the *Avarna* stream.

The Vaikunta Swami movement, Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Sangham, Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham and Ayyankali Pada, Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha, and the Sahodara Prasthanam, were the more prominent movements in the *Avarna* stream. They were inspired or initiated by Ayya Vaikunta Swamy, Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Poykayil Johannan (Kumaraguru) and Ayappan, respectively. Each of them objectively posed the task of annihilating caste; some through their radical views, some through the new, casteless communities they tried to establish. Above all, this radical character defines their historical contribution to the advance of Malayalee society. In a feudal society, bourgeoisie views, or bourgeois democracy are by no means bad things. They are the historically appointed leaders of social revolution. In a caste-feudal society, to be true to its historical task, bourgeois democracy must engage with the task of annihilating caste, overturning the caste order. The merit of the movements mentioned above lies in their dealing with this task, unlike the *Savarna* stream with its formal symbols of modernity. Yet none of these movements could relate caste annihilation to the destruction of feudalism and imperialism. Except for Vaikunta Swami, none of them identified colonial domination as an enemy or the nexus between the colonial power and the *Savarna* royalty's rule.

Bourgeois democracy inevitably fails when colonial domination protects caste-feudalism, even while transforming it. It cannot even identify the true nature or limits imposed by a modernisation taking place under colonial domination. This is because of its bourgeois class content. Even when genuine bourgeois democracy in an oppressed country stands against feudalism and imperialism, the capitalist class essence it shares with the colonial oppressor prevents it from repeating, even in its thinking, the revolutionary thrust of a

bourgeois Renaissance.[8] No doubt, the opportunities, endowments and hence capacities of the early 20th century movements in Keralam were quite varied because of their positions in the class and caste order. But that does not deny the ultimately bourgeois limits of their views or its centrality in restricting their practical aims. Only Sahodaran Ayyappan could come close to surpassing this, ideologically as well as practically, by pursuing rationalism, addressing the issues faced by the emerging modern working class and recognising the historical significance of the Russian revolution.

This was the immediate context of the budding working-class movement in Keralam. Its historical roots lay in the *Avarna* stream. In fact, its first organiser Bava Mooppan was inspired by Narayana Guru and so were his recruits. How did the emerging communist movement synthesis this? The new class, the proletariat, generated by the combined exploitation of imperialism, caste—feudalism and local capitalism could have overcome the drawbacks of the *Avarna* stream. Unlike other classes, this one alone had the living experience of all types of exploitation and oppression. It also had the potential capacity to take up Marxist ideology which could give an all-around view of society and link up all the streams of democratic and national awakening into a revolutionary assault on the old society. But that didn't happen. The communist party leadership that had to lead the proletariat in this task, repeated the old story of partial vision and partial opposition; now wrapped up in Marxist terminology.[9]

It is very important to grasp this and go beyond a simplistic criticism that reduces the whole question to the betrayal of *Dalits* by the communist party or the limitations of Marxism as a theory in dealing with issues like caste. First of all, not just the *Dalits* but all the exploited were betrayed by the undivided CPI when it degenerated to outright collabouration with the existing state in the 1950s. Besides, though Marxist classics have not written much about caste, they do insist on concrete analysis of the concrete situation and sol-

[8] We stress *genuine* to distinguish it from the sham bourgeois democratic postures of the comprador-bureaucratic bourgeoisie.
[9] *Bhoomi, Jathi, Bandhanam*, op. cit., page No.48.

idarity with the movements of the oppressed. When the CPI leader SA Dange met the Russian party leaders in 1947, one of the questions put to him by Zhdanov was about the caste question and what the CPI was doing about it.[10]

What needs to be stressed is that the communist movements failed to distinguish between the *Avarna* and *Savarna* streams, synthesise their contributions and firmly place itself as the continuator of the *Avarna* democratic stream, even while struggling to establish a proletarian class outlook as opposed to a caste outlook. Though the communist party organised and led many struggles on social and economic issues faced by the *Dalits* and other oppressed sections, and though this contributed to their social and political awakening and economic betterment, it failed to develop a revolutionary theory and practice that addressed the specificities of such issues. This of course must be seen in the context of its overall failure to develop a revolutionary program and take up the struggle to seize political power. The leading core was forever anchored in the *Savarna*, more specifically, Gandhian, tradition. A good example of this in relation to the caste question was the comparison made by EMS Namboodiripad between Kumaran Asan and Vallathol. Vallathol was held to be a national poet since he, unlike Asan, dealt with the freedom struggle and the new worker's movement, apart from other social issues. But where did he stand with regard to the caste order, lying at the very core of the social system? For EMS this was not an issue since Vallathol was sympathetic to the Gandhian *Savarna* reform theme. Seen historically, Vallathol's adherence to this theme was actually a retrogressive step, particularly in Keralam where the *Avarna* stream had already taken up the task of caste annihilation. Not surprisingly, while EMS gave a detailed account of the new movements that informed Vallathol's poetic impulses, he was silent about the anti-caste movements that contributed to genuine democratic thought and paved the way for the working-class movement.

The failure to synthesis the *Avarna* democratic tradition was compounded by a mechanical, economist, grasp and application

[10] https://revolutionarydemocracy.org/rdv7n1/Dange.htm

of Marxism. The leaders of the undivided CPI placed caste in the superstructure, ignoring its all too visible role in the relations of production. Though they formally adopted the agrarian revolution as the axis of the national democratic revolution,

> …the old, undivided CPI and later the CPM (or CPI) never addressed this particular feature of caste-feudalism, it never found a place in their theoretical work or agrarian programs. The slogan of 'Land to the Tiller' was grasped and applied in a mechanical, economist manner, ignoring the issue of identifying the real tillers, a position exclusively reserved for the tenants. Thereby *Dalit* landless peasants' right to the land they tilled was denied. They were excluded from the peasant movement by channeling them into agricultural labourer's organisations. These were focused on wages and working conditions and homestead or surplus land. Even where they gained land through homestead rights or distribution of surplus land under CPI or CPM led governments, this blocked them from any further right to land. In effect this was a modified continuation of the *Brahmanic* exclusion of *Dalits* from the right to land and an inevitable consequence of the programmatic positions of these parties.[11]

In the realm of ideology, though there were a few exceptions, in general the party did not develop an all-round critique of Brahmanism. Instead, leading figures like Dange and EMS were keen to uphold the *Brahmanic* tradition and reactionaries like Sankara. EMS's extolling the caste order as a great contribution of *Aryan Brahmins* and declaring that there would not have been a Kerala culture without it, is a notorious example of the vulgar Marxism followed by the undivided CPI. This is continued today in the approaches of the CPM and CPI on the struggle against *Savarna* fascism and on caste reservation. They fail to relate the re-flourishing of *Savarna*

[11] Ajith , "CPM on caste question," *New Wave*, No: 1, June 2006.

values with the still existent, though partially transformed, caste-feudalism. Instead of attacking Brahmanism they try to compete with the *Savarna* fascists by claiming the moderate *Brahmanic* standards of Vivekananda, Gandhi and similar other *Savarna* reformers. The recent instance of a top CPM leader in West Bengal declaring that he is first a *Brahmin*, then a Hindu and then only a communist, and the mild way this was dealt with by that party's central leadership, speaks volumes about its outlook.

We thus understand that the continued existence of caste and other forms of social oppression and discrimination, the continuing domination of *Brahmanic* values in all aspects of society, despite the social ferment created by the movements of the past, invariably expose the limitations and failures of those movements themselves. What took place here was not a thoroughgoing renaissance but its faint shadow. Our modernisation was by no means a capitalist one but an outcome of the partial transformation of caste-feudal society by imperialist colonialism. The re-reading of our past by *Dalit,* feminist, *Adivasi* activists and intellectuals have yielded many new insights that question the pretensions of Malayalee enlightenment. Yet, since modernisation is taken as a given fact, since this basic premise of those who benefit from the existing state of affairs is accepted, they internalise crucial elements of the oppressor's logic. We will now get into this.

Identity Politics

In recent years identity politics has become influential among socially oppressed sections of society. It would be wrong to dismiss this as an external influence or imperialist plot. No doubt, the impact of Black, women's and indigenous people's movements abroad have exerted influence. But identity politics has always been present, though not presented as such. And yes, imperialist agencies are making special efforts to promote this politic through NGOs and other means. However, the opportunities they get for this, as well as the fact that they could make headway, are in itself proof that

the matter cannot be dismissed as a conspiracy. There is a material basis for identity politics, which is why, regardless of whether imperialism conspires or not, it has an audience.

When a section of people suffer oppression, disadvantage, discrimination or economic deprivation, precisely because they are differentiated by race, colour, caste, ethnicity, gender, religion or nationality, that collective experience inevitably constructs a distinct identity by which they are marked and are forced to mark themselves. For a Marxist who understands that "social consciousness is determined by social existence" this is quite evident. And that is not the issue of difference with the proponents of identity politics. In real life, social existence (and social identity) is an ensemble of social relations. It cannot be reduced to any one of them alone. To give an example, the identity of a person as *Dalit, Adivasi* or woman is itself an ensemble of social relations. In the case of a *Dalit,* it is a construct of the social relations of not only caste, but of religion, nationality, gender and class. But *Dalit* identity politics, to be true to itself, must reduce this to the single aspect of caste. This is the same with any other identity politics.

A quest for emancipation guided by identity politics is invariably limited by this inherent disadvantage. Subjectively, identity politics may claim to address various facets of social existence. But its objective program of emancipation can never address the complex needs of emancipation of the oppressed. For a landless *Adivasi* woman, it is not enough to be emancipated from gender discrimination. She must also gain emancipation from ethnic oppression and class exploitation.

Can the pluralist argument being advanced today overcome this? No. Let us first eliminate the absurd notion of plurality between the oppressors and oppressed. This can never exist, other than as an oppressive relation. And in that case it is by no means a plurality. If we remove this from consideration, then what remains is the plurality of various oppressed social groups or sections. But this is not an answer to the disadvantage pointed above. This is plu-

rality among social groups, not within them. Take the example of a landless *Adivasi* woman given above. We can separate the various (or if you want, plural) social relations she is part of for purpose of analysis. In her life they are one. She lives and experiences them as a single whole. Her demand is for emancipation from all of it. Pluralism cannot satisfy this demand.

Moreover, identity consciousness, even when taken from one side only, such as *Dalit, Adivasi* and so on, divides into two. There is on the one side the consciousness of the oppressed against the oppressor. It includes self-respect, the conscious struggle against any sense of inferiority and inability. This is a powerful factor in any social revolution. On the other hand, so long as this consciousness is restricted to the confines of that distinct identity, it inevitably remains within parameters set by the oppressors. No matter how radical that politics is, the internalisation of the oppressor's outlook, in one or another way, becomes unavoidable. For example, though *Dalit* consciousness can confront caste oppression, that consciousness cannot but be tainted by caste, because it has to pit caste against caste. This remains true even when its political position makes caste annihilation a central issue. Since the present caste order serves not just oppressor caste interests but also those of imperialism and bureaucrat capitalism, caste annihilation cannot be attained merely by fighting against caste oppression. When this is sought to be overcome either by working out a position that addresses all of this or by defining the *Dalits* to encompass all the oppressed, it inevitably conflicts with the consciousness it is based on. The experience of the Dalit Panther movement of Maharashtra in the late 1960s and early 1970s or the DSS in Karnataka are examples of this.

Though identity politics of any form may subjectively believe it represents the interests of the most exploited sections, its class essence is invariably petit bourgeois, or bourgeois. This flows from the reformism inherent to it. In specific historical contexts this can play a radical role, but in the long-term perspective of total emancipation it becomes an obstacle. Finally, it must be pointed out that

many of the identity politics trends seen today represent a retrogression from the radical positions of caste annihilation, women's liberation and *Adivasi* liberation of the past. We will now examine some of these concepts.

On the *Dalit* question, even while swearing by Dr. Ambedkar, *samudayam* (community) formation is posed by some in place of caste annihilation. The process by which numerous sub-castes transformed into the present *Nair* or *Ezhava samudayams* is taken as the model to emulate. Though the argument that *samudayam* is not caste has been advanced, it is quite clear that it is nothing other than a reorganisation of the caste order. Regardless of whether the socio-economic positions of the *Dalit* castes allow formation of a single *samudayam* (or as some argue Christian and Hindu *Dalit samudayams*), will it make any basic change in caste oppression? Numbers by themselves are not going to do this. There are a number of states where the *Dalit* population is 25% or even more, is less fragmented into different castes and is organised. But that hasn't liberated them. Some *samudayam* proponents argue that the bigger grouping of *samudayam* will bring voting clout that can then be used to improve the *Dalit's* economic position. Creation of a vote bank can certainly help in bargaining. But experience shows that the benefits will only go to a tiny minority, while the majority will not only remain deprived but more tied down to the existing social system. Even if a separate party that operates within the Constitution of the present oppressive system is formed, it can only become yet one more collabourator of the ruling classes. It will mainly benefit a section of leaders to gain entrance into bureaucratic capitalism. This was the hard lesson of the Republican Party of India's degeneration that inspired the revolt against it in the 1960s and the formation of the Dalit Panther movement in Maharashtra. While the term "Dalit" popularised by the Panthers has been taken up, the lesson of their revolt is conveniently forgotten. The RPI history now repeats itself in the BSP.

Besides this, to take the example of the *Ezhavas*, for all the

numbers, vote-bank and assets of the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Sangham (SNDP), the poor among them are still poor. Though they have the advantage of their caste position, this has not emancipated them from the oppressiveness of the existing system. To attribute the comparatively better position of the Ezhavas mainly to their coalescing into a single *samudayam* is to forget the existence of landlords and other rich sections among them, their historical position in the caste order that allowed their upper crust to take advantage of opportunities given by colonialism, and above all, the leap in social consciousness achieved through the Narayana Guru, Sahodaran Ayyappan movements and the communist movement. While the *Dalits* had similar attributes in the Ayyankali, Poykayil Johannan movements and the communist movement, their position at the bottommost level of the caste order and class position far outweighed them. Like all other oppressed at the lowest rungs of any society, their emancipation demands a total destruction of the exploitative social system. This was not on the agenda of the past movements, including the communist movement.

Another trend is that of *Dalit* nationality. The proposal to conceive the *Dalits* as a distinct nationality argues for abandoning the classical Marxist definition of nationality. It states that the common experience of social oppression and economic status is sufficient to consider the *Dalits* as a pan-Indian nationality. Let us keep aside the objective validity of such a concept and its criticism on the Marxist nationality concept for the time being. All the *Dalit* castes in India, even historically, did not have a common economic status, though all of them were at the lowest rung of caste-feudalism and denied any right to land. And in the present period, class differentiation, mainly into a petit bourgeoisie and landless peasants, is obvious. But this may be explained as similar to the existence of classes in any nationality. Let us accept this for arguments sake, though the premise of a common economic status is lost. What is the implication of this nationality concept? By its logic, the *Brahmins* (or the *Savarnas* as a whole) should also be considered as a nationality, in this case

united by the common experience of social advantage through caste oppression. The practical, political relevance of the *Dalit* nationality position should be the struggle for right of self-determination. Should this right be accorded to the *Brahmins* or *Savarnas* and others? This is a pertinent question because the proponents of *Dalit* nationality usually link it to the demand for a rightful share of political power and economic resources. We will get into this matter later on. The point to stress here is that this concept abandons the task of caste annihilation by its very logic.

To come back to the question of the Marxist definition of nationality it will be useful here to recollect the 3rd Communist International's (Comintern) position on the Black nation in the USA and its right of self-determination, including secession. This was developed in the 1930s under the leadership of Stalin, an acknowledged Marxist authority on the nationality question. What was the materialist basis for this position? It was the fact that the Blacks, forcibly brought as slaves to the Southern States of the USA, had emerged as a nationality (despite coming from different tribes and regions of Africa), acquiring a common language (English), culture and psyche through the common experience of slavery. In the period when this position was adopted by the Blacks of USA were overwhelmingly concentrated in the Southern States and were mainly share croppers. This provided the material basis for raising the right of secession. It must be stressed that the implementation of this position demanded the destruction of the imperialist social system in America as a precondition. This position created a very powerful impact, not only among the Blacks but also within the whole American communist movement. It is notable that the Comintern and genuine communists in the American party had to continuously fight against the revisionists within the party to establish and take up this position. It was later dropped when the revisionists under Browder seized leadership of the party. The lesson this gives is that the Marxist concept of nationality is by no means an iron bound mould. If it is applied in line with the Marxist outlook it is quite capable of grasping society

in its motion.

Identity politics has also given rise to a trend of idolising tribal customs, rituals and ways of life and demanding tribal autonomy as a solution. This trend is strikingly blind to history and the present. One of its premises is the vision of a peaceful, democratic tribal society that was overthrown by *Brahmanic* forces. *Brahmanic* forces certainty destroyed and forcibly incorporated tribal societies. But tribal societies were by no means free of violence and oppression. One doesn't have to consult historical texts to learn this. It is well known that some tribes in Keralam were utilised as *adiyalars* by other tribes who were more socially advanced. Another characteristic of this trend is the ignoring of class differences within tribes and of historically given differences in the economic status among tribes. As a result its politics of tribal confederation has ended up as yet one more variant, and that too a weak one, of vote bank politics.

Cultural domination is one of the concrete manifestations of ethnic oppression. But the struggle against this cannot be posed as a return to some pure tribal state. This is not only impossible but it also ignores the necessity to reform outdated, particularly anti-women, tribal customs. The *Adivasi* tribes cannot but be influenced by changes taking place around them. The dominating influence, inevitably that of the oppressors, is one of degeneration and undermining. But all influences are not like this. For example, the surpassing of traditional *moopans* (who were in fact a link in the chain of caste-feudal authority) by modern organisational forms is certainly a step forward. No society or people can stand still. But the development of tribal peoples cannot mean the wiping out of their unique customs and their replacement by those of the surrounding people, though they may be historically more advanced. The reform and further development of customs and ways of life is something that must be carried out by the tribal peoples themselves. Only then can they advance as a people with self-awareness. This is the essence of a scientific position on tribal autonomy. Needless to say this cannot be realised within the present social system or its Constitution. The

tribal scheduled areas in the North-Eastern States and others give ample proof.

In keeping with the needs of imperialist globalisation and the recasting of ruling class legitimacy, the ruling classes have been promoting "affirmative action" as an alternative to caste reservation. The most concrete manifestation of this was the Bhopal Declaration promoted by the Indian National Congress. The Bhopal Declaration is part of the concerted attack on caste reservation via anti-reservation agitations, pseudo-objective scholarly essays on the need to expand the criterion of reservation by including all sorts of other aspects of backwardness and the promotion of *Savarna* interests under the guise of merit. The Bhopal Declaration calls for allotting a certain quota in government orders for products and services in favour of enterprises of *Dalits*, *Adivasis* and backward castes. The response of the educational and corporate elite to the recent proposal on implementing reservation in their sectors is also shaping up along these lines. Scholarships and a quota system in procurement are being held out as alternatives to reservation. This apparently offers equal opportunity to members of the oppressed castes; provided they have sufficient merit or entrepreneurial skill. There lies the catch. Centuries old shackles of caste effectively prevent the large majority of the oppressed castes from acquiring knowledge and skills more easily obtained by others. Even in the most liberal circumstances they must confront bias and discrimination, which continuously wear them down. Those who manage to surmount this will inevitably be a tiny minority. If this capacity to overcome is to be made the criteria, in place of the right of all members of the oppressed castes to reservation in education and jobs with concessions in admission and promotion qualifications and loan quotas, ultimately their vast majority is going to be cut off from any means to improve their situation. Yet this reactionary proposal has gained support from some well-known *Dalit* and *Adivasi* intellectuals and activists. This emerges from their limited vision of striking a deal with the existing social setup and a misplaced belief that the dynamics of globalisation can be used for

this. In the final analysis, it is yet another instance of the reformist quest of identity politics for a share in political power and resources.

The political demands of identity politics in the women's question are comparatively less concrete in Kerala, though it is an influential trend in feminist thinking. What exists prominently is the attraction of a number of feminists to the empowerment trap of the ruling classes. The very concept of empowerment denies the harsh fact of gender oppression and exploitation. In its view, the miserable condition of women is only due to lack of capacities, opportunities and resources and the solution is to give these to them. The ruling classes are trying to recruit politically and socially advanced women from among the exploited and middle classes into becoming their willing tools, by giving them posts in the local bodies. The self-help groups like Ayalkoottam and Kudumbasri have a similar role. Women are diverted from the real issues responsible for their misery such as gender discrimination in wages, landlessness, male irresponsibility and caste oppression. They are forced to believe that their only problem is a lack of saving habits. The traditional saving methods that women had developed are belittled and the grip of bureaucrat capitalism in their families is tightened through links with the state and financial institutions. Quite often these groups are directly utilised by the state to carry out anti-people policies and surveillance. All of this is either ignored or downplayed by feminist supporters of empowerment. All they see is the organising of women. This is a short-sighted approach. Women are being organised against their real interests by the state. Inevitably this will only become an obstacle for their emancipation.

We earlier mentioned the demand for a rightful share of political power and economic resources. Whether in the form of a *Dalit samudayam* or nationality demanding this right, of tribal autonomy, or of empowerment of women, this demand is common to various trends of identity politics. The demand of the oppressed for representation in political power and participation in the control and use of resources is just. But it should be posed not as a share, but as

equal participation in political power and all realms of society. First, the oppressed and exploited need the whole world, not just a share. Linked to this is the second thing: share in which power and which economy? As it stands, the demands being raised today are for a share in the existing political power and economy. This is certainly not what the exploited and oppressed need. It can benefit only those who crave to join the ranks of the exploiters. This is reformism and collabouration with the exploiters and oppressors.

In a society where there are socially disadvantaged sections, its revolutionary transformation must address their specific issues, particularly their social exclusion and oppression. The new state and society must incorporate special policies and structures for this. The new power established in the revolutionary base areas of Nepal, and the proposals put forward by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) on necessary representation of socially oppressed groups in a Constituent Assembly and in the new state were bold and new steps in this direction. Within the liberated areas, seven Tribal Autonomous Governments were formed. In regions where *Dalits* are present their representation in the new power was ensured by the constitutional provisions of the new revolutionary power. Similarly, women's representation was ensured at all levels of power. This was also done in the distribution of economic resources. We can compare this foundation laying of a new society achieved through a ten-year long People's War, with the South African experience. In South Africa the transfer of power to the African National Congress (ANC) under Nelson Mandela was acclaimed as a new model of addressing issues of social oppression and discrimination—in this case the Blacks and others who had suffered from apartheid. But the old exploitive state and social system were left intact because of the surrender of the ANC leadership in exchange for a share in it. Though apartheid has ended formally, the vast majority of Blacks still continue to suffer discrimination and a miserable life. This is the lesson of real life.[12]

[12] The betrayal of the Prachanda-Bhattrai clique leading to the ending of the People's War in Nepal has eliminated all the material gains mentioned above.

Politics of Class Struggle

If identity politics cannot be a guide for total liberation, where should we turn to? We must return to class struggle led by proletarian ideology, Marxism-Leninism-Maoism (MLM). The word return is purposely used since, for some time now, an exclusion of MLM from any role in guiding the resolution of social oppression and discrimination has become quite fashionable. This view is based on a one-sided evaluation of the past. One such theme is the "betrayal of the *Dalits*" by the communist movement, which we dealt with earlier. Yet another theme argues that though feudalism has been eliminated, caste remains. It then uses this as "proof" to assert that class struggle cannot achieve caste annihilation. In a similar manner, the failure of the old communist movement (and of the new Maoist movement for a long period) to develop a correct perspective on the women's question is coupled with a one-sided reading of experiences in the erstwhile socialist countries to argue that class analysis and struggle cannot guide women's liberation. We have already examined the positive and negative role of the class struggle led by the old communist movement. In the present context, a striking and common feature of all those who deny the centrality of class struggle must be pointed out here. They exclude any examination of the failure of the old communist movement to apply Marxism in a creative manner. They refuse to acknowledge the degeneration of this movement into revisionism and collabouration with the ruling classes, following the turn to parliamentarism in the early 1950s. Thus all the evils of mechanical, economist thinking and revisionism are conveniently attributed to Marxism as an easy way to justify turning away from the challenging task of carrying out revolutionary transformation.

Theoretically, caste, gender and ethnicity are declared as non-class categories, which cannot be dealt with by class analysis. Marxism is accused of class (or economic) reductionism. This view has

Yet, the new consciousness generated over those years still persists. It continues to inspire new efforts to revive the revolution and lead it to its logical conclusion.

received a boost with the post-modernist critique of worldviews like that of Marxism. This school of thinking argues that any worldview, as such, inevitably suppresses or overshadows the identity, particularity, of distinct existences.[13]

Let us first deal with the "non-class" argument. Caste, gender and ethnicity (or other social categories) each have their specific characteristics and dynamics. Class analysis does not mean denying this. This is not the meaning of the centrality of class struggle.[14] In fact, developing revolutionary class struggle and establishing it as the central task of all the oppressed demands that the communists must address these specificities in theory and practice.

Production and reproduction are the basics of human society in all its stages of development. When the development of production arrived at the stage of creating surplus, private property and exploitation of the labour of others became possible. Society divided into those who produce surplus through their labour and those who live off that surplus. It divided into the exploited and exploiters. This is the meaning of class division. The state, various forms of social division of labour, social institutions and customs, forms of ideology and culture—all of them served to perpetuate this division for the benefit of exploiters. The relations of reproduction were also moulded to serve this aim. Through various stages of social development all of these have been restructured; new ones have emerged. But, so long as exploitation exists, all of them will serve the exploiters and impose their domination, their class dictatorship. Revolutionary class struggle, the struggle for communism, aims at, "…the *abolition of class distinctions generally*, to the abolition of *all* the relations of production on which they rest, to the abolition of *all* the social relations that correspond to these relations of production, to the revolutionising of *all* the ideas that result from these social rela-

[13] In Keralam this was pre-dated by the "non-class" theory of the erstwhile CRC, CPI (M-L) led by K Venu.

[14] Marxist classics give enough proof of this. Some examples are Marx's analysis of the Jewish question, Lenin's rebuttal of imperialist economism which opposed the right of self-determination and Engel's and Mao's writings on the women's question.

tions."[15] Evidently, without addressing all the relations of oppression in a given society (such as caste, ethnic, gender, national, religious and so on) there can be no revolutionary class struggle.

Can the class stand, viewpoint and method of the proletariat address all the varied forms of social oppression? Yes, it, and only it, can do this. We have noted that all the forms of social division of labour, social institutions and forms of ideology of an exploitative society serve the interests of the exploiters. This means that all of them bear the mark of the class interests of the exploiters. All social constructs and relations in a class society are principally determined by and serve these class relations. Hence they can be challenged and overthrown only by an ideology, an outlook, that identifies them and the ruling classes they serve and directs the struggle against this. Unlike all other exploited classes, the proletariat's outlook is the only one capable of doing this in a thoroughgoing and consistent manner because it is the last class in history.

The proletariat was born with capitalism. Though capitalism has always used all the earlier forms of blatant exploitation like slavery and feudalism, by its nature it can, in principle, do away with all forms of extra-economic coercion. All it needs is a working class that will sell its labour power. Capitalist exploitation can exist with formal equality, without any form of birthright. It may thus be characterised as the "purest" and most intense form of exploitation that has ever existed on earth. To gain liberation the proletariat cannot be satisfied with ending any one form of exploitation or oppression. It must end all exploitation and oppression. This is why Marx and Engels declared that the proletariat can liberate itself only through the emancipation of all of humanity. And that is why, unlike any variety of identity politics that can only take up one or the other aspect of social oppression, proletarian ideology, MLM, can take up the task of guiding the liberation of the exploited and oppressed in its totality.

The Marxist position that class struggle is the way to end caste,

[15] Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France*, emphasis added. https://marxists.catbull.com/archive/marx/works/1850/class-struggles-france/ch03.htm

ethnic oppression or male domination means that revolutionary class struggle led by the proletariat has the potential to incorporate the struggles against such specific forms of oppression. But this will not be realised automatically. The all-embracing revolutionary potential of proletarian led class struggle can be brought out only when the communist party consciously tackles the contradictions underlying such specific issues in order to make them current issues of class struggle, thereby developing class consciousness and training its ranks. If this is not done, the call for class struggle will only be an excuse for the desire to coexist with various forms of oppression.

Proletarian consciousness cannot cohabit with caste, gender, ethnic, religious or national consciousness. But this class consciousness does not emerge spontaneously from class existence. Working class existence also divides into two. Along with its historical position as the class that will end all relations of exploitation and oppression, its situation of being divided by the mediums used by class exploitation such as caste, gender, ethnicity, nationality and religion, is also part of its objective class existence. Hence, the proletarian consciousness of struggle against class exploitation can only be developed by engaging with such contradictions as well. The proletariat can acquire a conscious grasp of its historical mission and unite all the streams of society rebelling against the old order into a grand torrent of revolution only by strictly distinguishing between the oppressors and oppressed and their respective consciousnesses, by uniting with the struggling traditions of the oppressed and by synthesising the experiences of those struggles to the heights of class consciousness. Only then can its party attain the political, social and cultural vantage of a true vanguard.[16]

One of the criticisms of *Dalit* identity politics is that the communist movement blocked the advance of *Dalits* through suppressing their caste identity by organising them as agricultural labourers, i.e. as a class. Some even declare that whatever advance the *Dalits* could make was achieved only through their own organisations and

[16] "Channathiyum, Pulayiyum, V.T.Bhattathirippadum," K. Murali, *Munnanipo-rali*, No. 35, May 1997.

struggle. The misrepresentation of historical facts is so blatant in this claim that we can just ignore it. What about the criticism on suppression of caste identity? If, as we have argued above, class struggle is the weapon for caste annihilation, then class organising is certainly correct. This also calls for the development of class consciousness as opposed to caste consciousness. The problem with the communist movement in the past was not class organising or the development of class consciousness. It was its wrong analysis of *Dalit* landless peasants as agricultural labourers and its politics of reformism (later revisionism) that could never develop proletarian class consciousness. Though the communist party took up struggle against caste oppression in its early period, this was guided by Gandhian *Savarna* reformism, not revolutionary Marxism. Once it turned to parliamentarism, even this was abandoned.

This experience can be compared to that of the Maoist movement that emerged through the Naxalbari armed uprising of 1967. The Maoists also took a long period to recognise the specificities of social oppression and develop a correct perspective. But, unlike the old communist movement, its founder leaders like Charu Mazumdar and Kanhai Chatterjee had an unwavering orientation of going to the bottommost levels of society, integrating with them and leading their struggle for the seizure of political power. This created the context for the gradual realisation of the errors in thinking on the caste question and similar issues and its rectification. Its revolutionary practice and class line had already brought forth outstanding revolutionary leaders from the most oppressed sections of our society. Over the past two decades, the struggle to develop a correct perspective and practice on such issues has become a vital part of the ideological (line) struggle within the Maoist movement. Thus the potential of its ideology is now being more fully realised. This was possible because of its dedication to MLM's stand that the total destruction of the existing social system and its state through armed struggle is the central task of any revolution.

These arguments still won't satisfy those obsessed by post-mod-

ernism. They will see it as yet more proof of how a word view (or metanarrative) suppresses particular identities. Any identity in itself generates a world view. So the issue is not whether we must have one or not. It is an attribute of all humans, given our capacity to think. If we are interested in transforming the world, then we must seek out a world view capable of guiding us. Caste or similar identities are simply not up to this task.

New Democratic Revolution

We will now proceed to concretise class politics in the context of our country. Regardless of the religious beliefs of the ruler, caste-feudalism was the norm in pre-colonial days. Shoots of local capitalism were emerging. They strengthened during the period of contention among colonial powers, before British colonialism consolidated its control. Feudal kings, like Tipu Sultan in Mysuru and Marthanda Varma in Thiruvithamkoor, had taken up some reforms of caste-feudal relations. But once British colonialism seized total control, all of this was pushed back. Colonialism transformed caste-feudalism only to the extent necessary for imperialist exploitation and plunder. Feudalism became the social base of imperialism. Imperialism generates a new type of capitalism, bureaucrat capitalism and a new class, the comprador-bureaucrat bourgeoisie. After the transfer of power in 1947, colonial, semi-feudal India became a semi-colonial, semi-feudal country—a country where various imperialists exploit, plunder and intervene in all the realms of society and is directly ruled by the alliance between the comprador-bureaucrat bourgeoisie and feudal landlords. Imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism are our enemies; they are the three mountains weighing down on the backs of the people. The Indian state serves them by protecting and perpetuating all of the relations of exploitation and oppression.

This state and the semi-colonial, semi-feudal social system it serves must be overturned through a new democratic revolution. It combines the tasks of national liberation and democratic revolution, the tasks of anti-imperialist and anti-feudal struggle. It is a new

democratic revolution because unlike the democratic revolutions of the past led by the bourgeoisie, it has to be led by the proletariat. Our country is still mainly agrarian. The peasant masses, particularly the landless and poor peasants are therefore the main forces of revolution. Agrarian revolution, i.e. the smashing of feudal relations, eliminating the landlords as a class and implementation of "Land to the Tiller", becomes the axis or main content of this revolution. Given the uneven balance of force between the enemies and the people this revolution must follow the path of protracted people's war. It must be developed as a unified war in the countryside and cities, with the countryside as the centre of gravity.

This is the politics of new democratic revolution. There are those who argue that this is outdated in Keralam and other parts of India where class relations have been transformed. We cannot go into this here.[17] But this much has to be stated—those raising such arguments eliminate the anti-feudal struggle and thereby undermine all struggles against various forms and relations of social oppression. We will leave it at that and go on. All the specific issues of social oppression such as *Dalit, Adivasi*, women's, transgender, religious minority oppression, all the struggles to end them, must be guided by the politics of new democratic revolution. These politics must be concretised and developed to address the specificities of each of them. Apart from that, the politics of new democratic revolution must also be concretised in the particularity of our country. The particular character of feudalism, i.e. caste-feudalism, and the specific tasks arising from this must be identified and made an integral part of the new democratic revolution. The caste order was the organising principle of feudalism. It was an integral part of its political economic, social and cultural structures. Brahmanism was its all-encompassing ideology.

Some other issues need to be dealt with here before we go ahead. One is the charge made by some *Dalit* intellectuals that the call for

[17] A systematic substantiation of why agrarian relations in Keralam are still semi-feudal and analysis of the various forms and relations of caste-feudalism that exist here can be seen in *Boomi, Jathi, Bandhanam*.

an agrarian revolution is a new *Savarna* plot to keep the *Dalits* in the agrarian sector. First of all those who raise this charge wilfully ignore the fact that the vast majority of the *Dalits* are casual day wagers in the rural sector. No reservation or affirmative action is going to help this majority get out of this rut. Moreover, agriculture is the only fallback when there is economic stagnation. This was clearly seen during 2000-2002. Owning land is still an aspiration among the vast majority. Nowadays, a growing share of *Dalit* tenant peasants is a prominent feature of the agriculture scene. Another mistake made by these opponents of agrarian revolution is their refusal to acknowledge the need for a radical land reform that will forever end the casteist character of land ownership. It is indeed an irony that these intellectuals who are angry with the CPI and CPM for their sham land reforms are vehemently opposed to rectifying this.

A rider to this argument is that the *Dalits* and other oppressed must shun revolution because they will have to pay the highest price with their lives. This is the talk of the petit bourgeoisie concerned about upsetting their seemingly secure existence. The whole history of humanity is the history of repeated uprisings and rebellions by the bottommost sections of society. They suffered most from the existing exploitative system. Therefore they were the most determined in struggle, willingly to pay any price. This was so in the past and it is so today and will be in the future too. It comes from their own realisation that there can be no greater price than the lives ground to dust daily by the miserable existence enforced by the exploitative system. This is the logic of struggle, of why the people rise up again and again in struggle, despite failures and betrayals.

Another charge is that the politics of new democracy is yet another way of deceiving the *Dalits,* since caste annihilation will not be achieved just by destroying feudalism. Yes, it is true that the completion of the new democratic revolution is not going to end caste. Neither is it going to end women's oppression or other forms of social oppression. The struggles to achieve this will be long drawn out. As the experiences of erstwhile socialist countries show, it will

be a very important part of the struggle to maintain a socialist orientation and advance to communism. But that does not mean that the new democratic revolution won't change anything. It will smash the foundations of social oppression in all its forms and create favourable grounds for developing the struggle to rid society of these evils once and for all. Most importantly, it will give the oppressed a powerful tool, their state, which they can wield to emancipate themselves. A large part of the struggle on such issues in the future socialist society will be ideological, educational, to transform world view. Along with that the struggle to establish, maintain and develop specific policies and structures in the political, social, cultural realms, and in the economy that tackle and help overcome the disadvantages carried over from the old society by different sections like the *Dalits*, *Adivasis*, women, religious and other minorities, nationalities and backward regions will also have to be advanced. New democratic revolution is the first step in this long journey.

The struggle to annihilate caste and smash the grip of Brahmanism is not just a matter of anti-feudal struggle. Bureaucrat capitalism, engendered by imperialism in the oppressed countries, and the comprador–bureaucrat bourgeoisie that grows up as the big bourgeoise in these countries, exists forever intertwined with feudalism. This is not a compromise, as argued by the CPM and CPI, but an inseparable urge born of its class character.[18] Brahmanism is very much a part of the Indian comprador-bureaucrat bourgeoisie's world outlook. This is not a simple continuation of the Brahmanism of the Smritis or Sankara. It was remoulded during the colonial period to suit the interests of the emerging Indian big bourgeoisie and those sections of feudal lords keen on seizing emerging opportunities in close company with them. It continues to be remoulded by the ruling classes. The direction of this remoulding is a matter of contention among them, but all are united in clinging to Brahmanism. It is contained in the very core of the Indian ruling classes: in their state, exploitation and oppression. Not just in the caste question, its stamp can be seen in all of its ideology, politics, culture and practice. And

[18] "CPM on caste question," op. cit.

the caste order, as a part of semi-feudalism, serves imperialism and the ruling classes. This provides a powerful basis to bring out the struggle against caste and Brahmanism from the comparatively narrower frame of the *Dalit* issue without reducing the role of specific struggle on the *Dalit* question. It also implies that the caste issue, or any of the other issues, cannot be dealt with in a piecemeal reformist manner, separated from the central task of seizing political power by destroying the Indian state.

The struggle to annihilate caste and smash Brahmanism is therefore not just a matter of *Dalit* emancipation. It is equally vital in the women's, *Adivasi*, transgender, nationality and religious minorities struggles for emancipation. In other words, it is vital for the new democratic revolution and the further struggle to build socialism and communism. One of the most notable contributions of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was his recognition of the central role of the struggle to annihilate caste and his stress on the need to dynamite the ideology sustaining it. He conceived of this ideology as a religion, as Hinduism. This was one of the strong bases for his leading a mass conversion of *Dalits* into Buddhism. But as we can well see, religious conversion has not ended caste oppression nor has any religion been resistant to Brahmanism. Though Hindu theology is Brahmanic, we should distinguish between the religious beliefs of the people and this ideology. The ideology of Brahmanism must be fought against in philosophy, culture and the value system. It cannot be restricted to Hinduism. All the religions existing here are infected by it, to a greater or lesser degree. Therefore it is correct to amend Ambedkar and call for "dynamiting Brahmanism." As we have explained earlier, this calls for class struggle, which means breaking away from the constitutionalism of Ambedkar. Only then can we really take up and synthesise his contributions.

To sum up, each form of social oppression has its specificity. But all of them share the common characteristic of emerging from and serving the exploitative system. None, neither the *Dalits*, *Adivasis*, women, trans-genders, Muslims nor any other social section,

can achieve emancipation if this is lost sight of. This common characteristic they share, and their specificities can be grasped simultaneously and addressed only by proletarian ideology—MLM—and class struggle—the new democratic revolution—that it leads. This is the only consistent, revolutionary politics of liberation.



APPENDIX

In Conversation with the Journalist K.P. Sethunath

Part 1

Brahmanism and Gandhi

Question: In our current discussion, especially at a time when the Hinduvadis have gained domination in politics, many of the progressive forces are putting forward the view that we must go back to the Gandhi-Nehru stream in order to counter Hindutva.

K. Murali: The problem I am referring to is that this Gandhi-Nehru stream is something that stays within *Brahminism*. Then why did the ruling class abandon it and adopt the aggressive *Brahminism* of the Sangh Parivar? This brand of *Brahmanism* was existent then too. Savarkar, the Hindu Mahasabha, Golwalkar, Hegdewar, all were there. The ruling class confined it to a corner. It was never allowed to break into the mainstream. It was considered as something to be kept away. So, how did it arrive at the prominence it enjoys today from that position? It is simply impossible without the consent of the ruling classes, unless they are prepared for it. Because, basically it is the State existing here that they should serve. Who are the ruling classes represented by this State? If it is incompatible with their ideas, then the Sangh Parivar will have no role. So why did the change occur? What was the crisis faced by the ruling class? What were the problems with their legitimacy? Why did they choose this path to overcome it? When we look into it thus we will find that it is not Sangh Parivar who began this, but Indira Gandhi. It is from the time of Indira Gandhi that the attempt to propagate *Brahminism* in this kind of an obvious way, explicitly, began. We saw it in Rajiv Gandhi too. We also saw it in the recent election campaign of Rahul Gandhi where the *poonool* [sacred thread] is exhibited.

Question: In the language of media, it is presented with the label mridu-hindutva [soft Hindutva] but it doesn't seem to be something that can be contained within this label.

K. Murali: Not at all. This is just another form of *Brahmanism*. I would like to point out that it is simply impossible today. Aggressive *Brahmanism* is required by the ruling classes to survive the challenges and crises they face today. So relying on Gandhi-Nehru concepts to confront it is of no use.

Question: Gandhi as the author of "Hind Swaraj"[1] *is seen to be totally different from Gandhi as a part of freedom struggle. This points to a fundamental change in Gandhi. What is your opinion in this regard?*

K. Murali: Of course there is a change. There is no doubt about it. There may be changes due to one's own experiences. But let's not forget the other struggles that took place during that period. The pressure it created, the moves that were needed to be made to cope up with it; there is such a thing also. It is not a linear change. It's not like Gandhi arrives, makes a plan and executes it. For example, we see Gandhi's earlier stance on *Dalit* reservation issues changed with time. But the most important thing to be kept in mind is that while passing through all this change, Gandhi has never abandoned the core values of *Brahmanism*. That is something to be noted. Most importantly let's look at the clash of views between Ambedkar and Gandhi when an organisation like Harijan Sevak Samaj that took up *Dalit* issues was formed. What was the issue that Ambedkar raised? The *Dalits* must fight the struggles against caste oppression for their emancipation on their own. It should be handled as a matter of their identity. But what did Gandhi stand for? He insisted that it should be handled by the *Savarnas* (upper castes) as atonement for their sins. This atonement is in effect a stance of condescending generosity. So I say that Gandhi was still trying to keep them within *Brahmanism*. What was Gandhi's main argument against a separate constituency? It was simply that it will divide the Hindu society. Ambedkar pointed to the reality of fragmented Hindu society. The *Dalits* were never a part of it. They were always excluded from it. Then on what basis can one talk about a unified society, this was the key question raised by Ambedkar.

[1] One of Gandhi's early writings.

Question: There is a view that it was the idea of national liberation from colonial occupation that made Gandhi to put forward this statement?

K. Murali: Yes. But there is one thing that we need to realise regarding this. Narayana Guru pointed out that it was the British who granted him *sanyas*. Because in any other period, he would certainly not have been allowed to live like that. We have the experience of Vaikuntaswami just before Narayana Guru. The king of Travancore put him in prison. The power was then in the hands of the king. As power was vested in the hands of a Kshatriya king, Vaikuntaswami was imprisoned in accordance to Brahmanic principles. It is beyond dispute that colonialism created new opportunities for the oppressed castes. If that had not happened, then probably they would have had to gain it through struggles. But the fact is that they got new opportunities. If freedom meant losing these newly gained opportunities, then wouldn't their questioning of the meaning of that national liberation be quite legitimate? That so-called national liberation would be another manifestation of *Savarna* domination. *Dalits* and other oppressed castes quite naturally found it to be an attempt to establish a new kind of *Savarna* domination by exploiting the possibilities of nationalism or anti-British struggle.

The Savarna and Avarna Streams

Question: When we reach this point, we are getting into the reality of modern India. A stream in the history of our national Independence struggle was one which always strove for the recreation of the domination of Savarnas. There were different streams that stayed out of this. How accurate would it be to assess that the Indian state we are seeing today is something that denies these varied streams?

K. Murali: It certainly is accurate. It has always excluded them. It should also be noted that it has been compelled to cope with them, to grant them some space. But basically it is excluded. It is branded as anti-national and communal. This is something that Sahodaran Ayyappan points out. The viewpoint of the above-mentioned *Savarna* domination is claimed to be national, but on the other hand it is declared to be communal when presented from the viewpoint of caste and oppression of the castes. I think there are some other problems with that argument, something that I have

tried to articulate earlier. When we speak of the process of democratisation there are two basic streams. One is the *Savarna* stream and the other, the *Avarna* one (broadly speaking, all the oppressed castes). Coming to the *Savarna* stream, it tried to reform many of the customs, practices and values of the caste-feudalism of the old period. Because firstly, the new period requires a change, a reorganisation. Secondly, within the *Savarnas*, there is an upward movement of those who were *Shudra* earlier. They need to make their own change. It is also a period when a *Savarna* bloc, a social category called the *Savarna* emerges, transcending that of simply *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya* and so on. But basically caste is not a disadvantage for them. It is in fact a social capital, a benefit for them. So they can make reforms from within.

There is an example I have pointed out before. In Chandu Menon's "Indulekha," the love between Madhavan and the heroine. It is simply something personal. The *Brahmanical* interference of Soori Namboothiripad comes in between. But this love eventually succeeds in overcoming it. It points to a validation of personal love negating the customs of *Brahmanical* domination. But at the same time, there is also a situation that the two, as *murachekkan* and *murapennu*, are betrothed by custom. Their relation does not, in that sense, violate the Nairs' casteist norms. What is seen there is the possibility of some reforms while staying within it. This is the general characteristic of *Savarna* democracy. Despite this, it too has played a role in the process of democratisation. That is beyond dispute. Whether it be Chandu Menon's "Indulekha" or other such works, or the Malayali Memorial demanding employment for the Nairs, they are certainly an integral part of our history of democratisation. But we should not fail to see its limits. Moreover, there is a qualitative difference between the Malayali Memorial and the Ezhava Memorial. The former came from angst over lost positions and the desire to regain them. The latter came from claims for positions that have been denied for ages. It's a new right. It's not a recovery of the old right. So, in that respect, there is basically a distinction between them. There is a basic distinction between the *Savarna* and *Avarna* streams. It is in the light of this distinction that we should examine them. Obviously the *Avarna* stream had its limitations. Firstly, it was often confined to a bourgeois perspective. On some occasions, it has compromised with the imperialist, British power. But to speak of it as anti-national and standing separate from the freedom movement just for

this reason alone, is meaningless. For example we see such superficial views in EMS' qualifying Vallathol as a national poet after comparing Kumaranasan and Vallathol.

Question: EMS criticised Kumaranasan for taking "pattum valayum" (silk and bracelets—an honor, as a form of appreciation) from the British.

K. Murali: Ok. It could be criticised that "pattum valayum" were taken. But how does Vallathol become a national poet? Especially after Sahodaran Ayyappan? How could a person simply raising the issue of untouchability only be considered progressive in a place like Keralam where personalities like Ayyappan, who took the values of Narayana Guru a step further, proclaiming the idea of "no caste, no religion, no God for humanity"; like Ayyankali and Poykayil Johannan and others lived? The Malayali community had gone beyond that. It had a history of Ayyankali's Villuvandiyathra (bullock cart ride) for the right to public roads and agrarian agitation for the right to education, the many struggles fought by the Sahodara Sangam and so on. Then this comes after all this. In fact, when Vallathol speaks of it, embracing Gandhian views he was going backward, not forward.

Question: The debates surrounding politics, particularly those about the Hinduvadis are all centered on the cultural. Beyond this, how can they be explained in a fundamental socio-economic context? Is it not an issue of what is put as a post-colonial state, the Indian state, and not just of the Hindu/ Hindutva-vadis? When we say that Indira Gandhi or Rajeev Gandhi, all of them nurtured neo-Brahmanism, wasn't it a restructuring or re-positioning of the post-colonial state in a specific manner?

K. Murali: Yes, but I have disagreements with the use of the term post-colonial. It's alright if it's used in the sense of "coming after colonialism But the way it is really being used has an undertone of us being free; though it is not spelt out explicitly. Even though we say we gained freedom, it is not really nothing more than formal independence. India was still a Dominion of Britain from 1947 to 1950. It is meaningless to say therefore that we got freedom in 1947. It was only in 1950 that the status of Dominion ended and India was declared as a sovereign state. But fundamentally, all these third-world countries, India included, are neo-colonies, all subject to neo-colonial exploitation. Indirect imperialist control and exploitation is going on. This being the reality facing us, the crisis it creates

can never be resolved by the ruling classes within this framework. Which is why the ideas of self-reliance, and import-substitution economy have been given up step-by-step and replaced with an export-centered economy, and then the later shift by the '90s towards globalisation, can all be seen. The recently declared Kochi-Coimbatore industrial corridor is just like the Nagpur-Mumbai or the Delhi-Mumbai corridors—but where are all of them sprouting up from? On one side, CPI-M's study congress claims this as the solution they discovered for the development issues Keralam is facing, while on the other side, Gadkari and Fadnavis discover the same thing! And Modi too advances it. So there is a common source to this—and that is imperialism. And then you'll realise that all these are nothing more than different newer forms of development plans, devised by the imperialist agencies for different times. They can never overcome the crisis in political legitimacy and the economy. There was a new awakening with globalisation, the feeling that something is about to happen. A big noise was made about how the IT sector is developing, this is developing that is advancing and so on.

Question: In one sense, it was a reorganisation of labour on a global scale.

K. Murali: Yes, there was a reorganisation. But it has hit a roadblock there. The same happened here, and that's the basic problem. After the transfer of power of '47, there was a long period where the Congress held power both in the states and the centre. What was their basic claim? Congress led India to freedom, that they were now leading India to development, that the tradition of Gandhi and Nehru tradition was guiding us. It was at the centre of a legitimacy of rule which enjoyed domination politically and culturally.

Question: The state that was formed after the transfer of power in '47 was also one of a benefactor type. It took on the additional responsibility of leading the people along a proper path.

K. Murali: But was it just India? That tendency was global. The idea of the welfare state. The state had a direct role in it. In European countries the state has a direct, active role, be it in the social or educational or whatever realm. I think it was a common thing then. Especially coming after the economic crisis that preceded it. And then there was the quite different model of the Soviet Union. All this would have been an influence. What

I was trying to formulate is this: whatever the legitimacy of the state was based on, like ideas such as independence or development and so on, all of them reached their inevitable crisis by the sixties. On one side all of its problems were starting to get visible one by one. On the other hand there was also a growth of new forces from beneath. That takes form as a crisis within the Congress. Its old centralisation falls apart. This is when the idea of a high-command comes up. Because there was no other way to keep themselves together. Be it the Congress, or the country itself, the problem is of the need of a stronger centre. But that is when new movements started coming up, national movements, revolutionary movements like Naxalbari. Many others too. In all ways the legitimacy was facing challenges.

It is from that point that the ruling classes started to have thoughts on how to rethink or recast it as the need for a new consensus was evident. And what are the main parts of that consensus? One, an explicit *Brahminism*. Not aggressive but open, nothing hidden about it. Stating outright that it this is that is to be protected. The RSS' stance is an aggressive variant of it. Secondly, this self-reliance is meaningless. Let foreign capital flow in, so that it'll bring development, that this ought to have been done earlier, etc. As long as the GDP increases, we needn't worry about anything else. And the third? The attempt to forge a *Savarna* bloc at the all-India level. It took form clearly through anti-reservation protests. The *Savarnas* in various states came out in these protests. The challenge to reservation was a questioning of the logic, reasoning, underlying reservation, one based on Gandhian views. That was what was being done at the ideological level. What is the need today for reservation, they asked? Why are we to blame for whatever our ancestors did? This is an overthrowing of the earlier thinking, the *Savarna* mental state, that reservation is justified, mistakes were committed by us earlier, that should be rectified and so on. Similarly, at a communal level, step by step, Islamophobia was pumped up with arguments that it is the Muslims who are causing problems, their population is high, they are simply going on increasing it, or that they are loyal to Pakistan. Incidents like Moradabad[2] happened during the Congress rule, that did not happen under BJP rule.

Question: One of the main characteristics of the Indian state in the '80s was the splintering of the consensus that had taken form after '47.

[2] A gruesome incident of state terror that took place in 1980, where Uttar Pradesh (UP) police rounded up Muslim males and shot them dead.

K. Murali: True.

Question: And in it, one important issue was that of the national question of Assam, Punjab, etc. or ethnic issues like those of Jharkhand, Utharakhand and Gorkhaland. The communal riots happened parallel to them. Weren't all these political events undermining the solidity of the state apparatus, or its credibility?

K. Murali: One type of credibility is negated, but meanwhile another is created. Both happen together. The latter is brought up by negating the former.

Question: Does the aggressive Hindutva represent this new type of political legitimacy?

K. Murali: Yes, that is what I had mentioned, which is why it appeals to the ruling classes.

Why the BJP?

Question: What I'm trying to say is that the Congress finds itself unable to run the State. The Hinduvadis propagate a commonsense, common logic that the Congress can only appease Muslims or minorities, only we can run the state in a powerful manner.

K. Murali: It's not just appeasement, though. They've done plenty of massacres as well. But the thing is, once you create a stage for explicit *Brahminism*, the aggressive one will follow. Just imagine, what would have been the reaction if someone in 1952 campaigned for votes, showing off his *janeu* (sacred thread) and claiming he's a *Brahmin*? When the then Congress President Rahul Gandhi does that today, there is a situation where that is simply seen as an instance of soft-Hindutva. It does not cause any shock. Concerned questions about how the president of a party like the Congress can do this were not raised. The Congress is trying to play the RSS' game. And the discussion is about whether or not the Congress can take on the BJP and win. What I am pointing to is this change. Things have been taken to a new level. A situation has been brought about where the narrative begins from this level. And if that's where things are, it would be the aggressive *Brahminism* that will be better received. Because there

are no confusions or doubts in that *Brahminism*. It is something its proponents have been saying for long. They're quite prepared in all senses to implement it. This is the force on which the ruling classes can rely the most.

Sangh's Influence Among the Oppressed Castes

Question: One important thing to see when looking into the electoral success of the new-Hinduta (RSS) is the influence they have in Dalit-OBC sections. If we see the 2014 and '19 election results, the majority of seats in Dalit-Adivasi reserved constituencies were won by the BJP. Same with the OBCs. Except Mulayam Singh Yadav's group, OBCs (Other Backwards Classes, mainly intermediate castes) in UP mostly are with the BJP. It is assumable that there must be some social engineering at work here that appropriates them into the Savarna politics. Then how do we form a political consciousness against Savarna Hindutva?

K. Murali: It is important to realise that there is a layer among these sections that aspire to move into *Savarna*-ness. Petit-bourgeois sections, as well as some bourgeois elements have emerged. For them the next necessity is to move to *Savarna*-ness. They want to get that sort of acceptance. They also are very influential within their respective castes, and if they move over to some side, their influence brings others along. This is the class the RSS and BJP is pulling in. So what I am saying is that this sort of a material condition has come about. This is not something achieved just through social engineering. A material foundation allowing such social intervention has emerged. Secondly, be it SP or BSP, or RPI, all are constrained within certain castes only, like the SP was a party of the *Yadavs*, and not all OBCs, or similarly for the BSP, or the RPI.[3] The SP was never a party of all OBCs. It is mainly a party of the *Yadavs*. Similarly the BSP never was a party of all *Dalits*. It too mainly represented a specific caste, the *Jatavs*. In the case of the RPI in Maharashtra it mainly represented the *Mahars*. Not that this is completely, exclusively so, but these communities form the majority within the respective parties. Moreover the benefits of reservation are also mostly gained by these communities. Quite naturally those left out, those who have not gotten as much benefits, their dissatis-

[3] BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) and RPI (Republican Party of India) are political parties predominantly based on *Dalits*.

faction will be there. The BJP is able to tap into these. So in UP and Bihar what they did was to avoid the dominant communities, and make alliance with the excluded, the *Kurmi* community in UP for example. For them, they are trying to find some way to get out of their situation. If they can become a Minister or MLA, enough can be earned for some generations itself. And so they go over there. There is nothing really surprising about that.

Part 2

Caste Annihilation

Question: The most concrete issue of the basic democratisation of Indian society is that of annihilation of caste. This is something that we have understood earlier itself. But it is precisely in that matter that the Indian State has totally failed after the transfer of power. In this context this issue is becoming extremely relevant since the Dalits or the backward communities, I am not sure how much that term "backward" is appropriate, whatever it might be, the fact is that these communities are being assimilated by aggressive Savarna Hinduvadis. At the minimum in electoral politics. How should we analyse this situation? How can we overcome it? Because this is in fact the most important issue of the internal democratisation of India.

K. Murali: In my opinion, caste annihilation is something which will only be possible along with large-scale social change. Corresponding to it, as part of it, that is how it's going to happen. Inter-caste marriage and other such measures will help to weaken caste. It will help to create a consciousness against it. But it's also a fact that in a society where caste continues to exist, it will have only a limited role. Secondly, quite often people who do such inter-caste marriage ultimately often end up admitting their children in school as members of one or the other caste. They often try to do it in such a way that the child will get the benefit of reservation. That is they are trapped in a situation where they continue to be bound within the chains of caste.

At the level of electoral politics though the BJP has been able to make significant sections of these oppressed castes as the fighters of its aggressive *Brahmanism* in my opinion that is a temporary phenomenon. Because basically so far as those masses are concerned they cannot coexist with it. Incidents like the one at Una or the recent one where *Dalit* children were

beaten to death, in so many instances that understanding will certainly develop among the *Dalit* masses at a broad level. In elections they will vote in many different ways, because the electoral vote on many occasions is not a reflection of actual opinions. A number of other compulsions, interests are what motivate people to vote for one or the other person. As I pointed out earlier there is the issue of the elite that has grown up among them, of their selfish interests, and the direction in which they are leading the masses. But even then all of these are temporary phenomena. They cannot continue to stand up in front of a situation of social advance. At present for example, the BJP has the advantage in all the reserved constituencies in Gujarat. Yet, the polarisation that has emerged there after Una, the large-scale unification of *Dalits*, the emergence of new leadership like Mewani or like Chandrashekhar Azad in Uttar Pradesh, what do all of these show? Electoral politics has never succeeded in preventing that. Though the BJP has made some temporary gains it has not been able to prevent that polarisation. Because, basically, aggressive *Brahmanism* is an extremely divisive ideology. It can never achieve this so-called Hindu unity. No matter how much it pontificates about it, in the final analysis it has to necessarily bring about the domination of casteism, of those who pride themselves to be the uppermost section among the *Savarnas* itself.

We can now see an example of the Lok Sabha speaker who is a staunch RSS fellow. He surely would be knowing what the RSS policy is nowadays. Yet what is he saying? He said that only the *Brahmin*s have the right to rule, or the capacity to rule. On the one hand go around speaking about Hindu unity and the need for Hindus to unite, to take positions against caste, to state that *Savarnas* should go to *Dalit* houses and take food there, and invite them back to their houses. So you have Mohan Bagavath going around making speeches on all this and in the midst of this that senior RSS fellow is speaking like this. That is something that comes from his innermost feelings. No matter how much he has been trained by the RSS, no matter how much Mohan Bagavath will tell him that these are not things we should speak about in public, we must keep it in our minds for the time being, etc., that has to come out from his innermost self. Because once you give room to aggressive *Brahmanism* then it has no limit. You cannot say that it can only go to this extent. It has to come out in all of its details and forms. And therefore, since it has this character, polarisation is inevitable. So far as the masses of the basic sections are concerned they will certainly

turn to the path of struggle for their demands.

The Limits of Parliamentary Politics

Question: Another question that comes up in relation to this, a point that I am trying to raise, is that our liberal left forces, whether it is the Congress or the parliamentary Left, they have not been able to bring up any alternative against Hinduvada. They have not only failed to bring up any alternative, I have the opinion that the domination of Hinduvada today is because they have directly or indirectly helped it. In such a context how can we face off against Hinduvada politically?

K. Murali: First of all it cannot be tackled through parliamentary politics. Because parliamentary politics represents ruling class politics. The change from the old liberal *Brahmanism* to the present aggressive *Brahmanism* has come about precisely because of the necessities of this ruling class. And all these political parties are complicit in it in one or the other manner, whether it be the parliamentary Left or the Congress. Take the case of Bengal for example. We saw the phenomenon of CPM votes transiting en mass towards the BJP. To say that this happened because they fear the Trinamool Congress, that they switched over to the BJP in order to face up to the TMC, is sheer nonsense. That is not the reality. Rather the fact is that so far as the CPM rank and file is concerned it makes no difference to be in the BJP. Because their culture, their social life, their rituals, in all of there is no difference between them and those who have already joined or aligned with the BJP.

Today the RSS is making a big deal of the Ram Navami which was never a big thing in Bengal. Mamta and others are opposing this saying that this is not something that accords with Bengali culture. They are opposing the processions where weapons are flashed around. But for many years now, the celebration of Durga Puja, the building up of large *pandals*, all of this has been a permanent part of the parliamentary Left's political activity or cultural activity. Never have they ever attempted to bring about something different, to bring in an alternate idea or tradition. It is not that there is no such alternate tradition in Bengal. There surely is. But the parliamentary Left has never tried to uphold that tradition and through that spread a secular consciousness among the people. Because what they follow is parliamentary politics. Electoral politics. What is important for

them is votes. So all they calculate is which caste will vote for whom, which religious section will ally with whom. Therefore in my opinion you cannot expect any resistance from those sections. Other than their making some noise, or opposing, or even casting votes against some bills, or proposing some bills in the parliament, in the end, ultimately they will allow all these things to happen. So contrary to this, we should primarily or mainly focus on the new uprisings, advances, initiatives emerging from the side of the masses. That is already happening here. As I pointed out earlier, the polarisation that is seen after Una, the development that is seen in UP, the uniting of more than 200 organisations in the Elgar Parishad in Maharashtra, there are so many such new initiatives that are coming up from the basic level in various places. New struggles, or existing struggles on environmental issues are also part of this. Through such struggles, at a very broad popular level, it will be possible to generate a new consciousness against this aggressive *Brahmanism*. On the other hand the most decisive question is that of the state itself. The forces facing up to that state, who are attempting to destroy that state with force of arms and create a new state, those forces, ultimately, they themselves are those who are going to face up to this in the long term. They are the forces who are going to eliminate this altogether.

The Revolutionary Left

Question: The present situation of that type of a politics, at present it is limited to a small circle. It is facing limitations in entering into the mainstream, or there is a situation where it cannot come into the mainstream. The objective situation has always been favourable for an uprising. But the absence of theoretical or intellectual preparations has been the main obstacle for such an upsurge. Isn't such a situation existing today also?

K. Murali: Yes. But it is also true that there are upsurges going on that have overcome this. That is beyond doubt. We can make that out from reports that are coming from places like Chhattisgarh. There are reports of such upsurges at the local level. Beyond that there is the question of the influence, the impact it is creating at an altogether different level. As a symbol of resistance, as a symbol of the forces who are standing up against the State, as a model of serving the people wholeheartedly, genuinely, at all these levels it is creating an impact. In all the new upsurges and agitations

that are coming up we can see one or the other reflection of it, in one or the other way. Besides we must also remember another matter. This is not a new phenomenon. The situation of such forces, staying separate from the mainstream, or having to face isolation, is not something we have to face in this country alone. In almost all countries that had been the situation for quite a long time. It is only when in certain concrete historical situations, a favourable situation is obtained, and the crisis reaches a totally new level, it is only then that these forces transform into major mainstream forces. Therefore, to say that this is not a countrywide force or presence now, in my opinion that is not a big matter.

When we look at history we see that this has been the condition in most countries. What matters is that it has continuity. We see that continuity. That is the particularity of the revolutionary movement that emerged through Naxalbari. However much setbacks it has suffered, however much losses it has suffered, it has shown its capacity to withstand. Not only withstand but to overcome that and gain new advances. Certainly the Indian State is not a small force. It has a huge armed force and other infrastructure. And apart from that it has also got a lot of supportive forces. And therefore to face up to such a force with a small force that comes to at the most three thousand odd is not an easy matter. The fact that this small force has been facing up to its attacks for so many years is something that would have been impossible without the support of the masses. It is certainly something that would not be possible on the strength of weapons alone or just because there are some forests there and places you can hide. Without the support of the people it could never have sustained itself like this.

Communists and the Caste Question

Question: In the discussions on India's democratisation the main issue is that of caste. The criticism is that the communist parties have never been able to understand the caste system in India is very strong. This criticism exists right from the time of Ambedkar. Today such criticisms are coming up from among the left forces themselves. Even in this situation our parliamentary communist parties are handling the question of caste as something that is going to be resolved through class struggle. They have not yet broken off from that old understanding that caste is yet another form of class, merely a matter of consciousness. There is also the criticism that caste is something that cannot be

comprehended through Marxist concepts.

K. Murali: In my opinion the early communist movement, including the ML movement, did face such a problem. There is no point in closing our eyes towards that history. The positions adopted by the unified communist party on the mill workers' struggle is a fact. There are articles written by Ambedkar criticising them. If that had not been the reality then there would have been no reason to write them. So there is no point in closing our eyes to such historical facts or arguing on the basis of certain reasoning that such a thing could not have been happening then. But today a lot of things have changed. I think, as far as I know, today there is no party that considers caste as merely a matter of false consciousness. As far as I understand, both the CPM and CPI do not understand caste in that manner. The articles written by CPM people on caste, on the caste question, have not dealt with it like that. But the question is this, at what level are they understanding and handling that question? It is at the level of reforms. They understand it as something that can be resolved within the existing system through constitutional positions. They see it as something that can be settled through these measures alone. And certainly they also accept that class struggle has its role in this also. But unlike this, or different from this, there is the question of radical social change. Because caste is something that is tied up with the production relations existing here. So long as one does not take that up, so long as those relations are not smashed, caste annihilation is not going to take place. That does not mean that caste annihilation will take place just by doing that. Certainly its remnants will continue to exist. Certainly *Brahminism* as an ideology will continue to exert its influence. Then to tackle that one would need specific methods of struggle and forms of struggle also. Certain initiatives in that direction have been taken up under the initiative of the revolutionary movement in the recent period. But they face a severe problem, because there is the reality that they do not have the freedom to carry out mass activity. Therefore, precisely because of that, the activities they carry out in that regard, they cannot claim them to be their own activity or give propaganda to it in those terms. But as far as I understand, in fact, many such activities are being carried out by them in this matter.

Question: How do you respond to the criticism that in its essence itself Marxism is unable to comprehend the issue of caste?

K. Murali: I don't think so. Yes, Marxism puts stress on class. True. But at the same time one has Marx's observation that the individual essence is an ensemble of social relations. What are these social relations? The social relations in which an individual involves are not those of class alone. Marx himself has pointed out how class reality divides the individual. He has observed how there is a division caused between the personal individual and the class individual. So then we have the responsibility of taking that analysis further ahead. What I mean is that this is not something beyond the capacity of Marxism. It is not something that cannot be comprehended by Marxism. When we view some matter from the standpoint of feminism, or from that of the *Dalits*, or from that of the *Adivasis*, or religious minorities, all of that is a reality. What they articulate are the issues of the specific type of oppression, of the specific alienation, they face, and other similar issues. Just because a woman is a proletarian or a poor peasant all these specificities do not disappear. That is, there is no meaning in saying that the only reality existing is that of the poor peasant and the others do not exist. The individual is an ensemble, a complex ensemble, in which all of these aspects are intermingling. Therefore there is reason for a movement, there is a necessity for a movement that would address all of these different aspects of an individual's existence. And that is something that can be conceived. So I don't think that this is something that goes beyond, or stands apart from the Marxist theoretical framework. **Part 3**

A Broad Alliance of Struggles

Question: How one would intervene in the situation as a political task is indeed a challenge, what I mean is, when Dalits and other similar sections are being assimilated in Savarnaism and that is being just manifested in electoral politics, what would be the form of an alternative political practice?

K. Murali: Basically at the political level and the mass level what is needed are such mass agitations and mobilisations—that itself is the most important thing. What I pointed out earlier is that this assimilation you indicate is something that is impossible, it is something temporary or a superficial matter.

The Congress under Gandhi's leadership the *Brahmanism* was able to bring the eradication of untouchability and such similar things in its program. For some time that had its influence, but without much delay it

dissipated and in the '60s we saw the *Dalit* Panther movement coming up. So what I am indicating is that there is a limit to which they can be assimilated. Basically it expels or isolates or excludes these sections of people and so far as these excluded sections of people are concerned there is no other way for them other than that of struggle and agitation. One sees that those who have been educated among them are gaining a better recognition of the issue. Unlike the past in Northern India there is now a large section of youth who are gaining recognition of their situation, that is not just in Keralam or such states. Then there is the impetus given by the aggressive *Brahmanism* of the Sangh Parivar, the positions of the Sangh Parivar. For example, just the other day there was a news item in the *Indian Express*. It was about how those who have been accused of attacking some people, who they claimed to be involved in selling beef and all that, in Jharkhand. These people have been acquitted because there is no evidence against them. The *Indian Express* had studied some 53 cases and they understood that the majority of these cases had ended up in acquittal because of the lack of proof or because the charge sheet itself has not been fully filed.

Now, these accused who have been acquitted are all activists of the Bajrang Dal, that is RSS people. On the one hand, they do this and on the other hand they claim that all those in India are Hindus and that they stand for assimilating everybody. That is what Mohan Bhagwat is saying. But however much he speaks, however much he craves this, this polarisation is inevitable. So the first thing is that there is a limit to assimilation.

And the second thing is that in order to face up to it, apart from other basic methods, the masses have to be mobilised on a large scale. The potential for that has increased today. Because people are seeing, realising the looming danger of a countrywide fascist attack, a fascist crackdown. This is not simply a matter of the religious minorities or of the *Dalits*. They have started to lay their hands on the rights gained by workers by slashing down workers' rights by amending labour laws. They have started to take steps to eliminate whatever rights have been gained by the workers through struggles. And this is happening at a very large scale. Because they know that in the present situation large scale agitations are going to come up. In my opinion, the crackdown that we saw in Kashmir is not simply related to the Kashmir question. They are trying to send a message through that action. They are trying to give the message that by relying upon the brute strength of the State, with the silent permission of the courts, they

will do whatever they want to do here and there is nobody who can challenge it. This is a message for other parts of the country, for other sections of people. Therefore, the people are also realising that human rights and all that does not have much value here. This is being recognised by different classes. And as a result of that unification is taking place at a different level. This definitely demands a conscious intervention.

Question: All these developments indicate the absolute necessity of a very conscious and clear political intervention. The possibility of such a practice would be a united front in which different sections of people unite. But to what extent is such a united front practically possible? Or in what sense, or in what way, initiative will be taken for that?

K. Murali: A united front is certainly practicable. But such united fronts need not necessarily be sustained over a long time. They may arise in relation to a particular issue. They may exist for some time and then they may dissolve themselves. There are many reasons for that. Not only that, there will be people who join these united fronts who are interested in parliamentary politics; there will be those who are not interested in that. And therefore, when an election comes, naturally this would lead to a disintegration of that unity, such problems can come up. But even then, there's always the possibility for such united fronts. And that is taking place, that is getting formed in different places, at different times. Even in Keralam too you can see this at various places. For example, all these anti-fascist forums or committees and the various marches and all the struggles that are taking place under their leaderships. Many forces are getting united in that. What I indicated earlier is an important limitation, a serious limitation, being faced by the revolutionary forces in that they are being oppressed and they are facing ban. This ban exists even on the matter of mass activity. False cases are being charged against people who are suspected to have some link with them. And as a result of that, the possibility for this revolutionary force to directly get involved in these mass activities is very much limited. If you try to do that, then it will immediately invite suppression. They are intervening indirectly. And the results of that indirect intervention can be seen.

Question: The fascist threat is now a very concrete presence. Perhaps rather than saying fascist threat it will be more correct to say fascist steps, actions.

Other than saying that our opportunities are limited or that the opportunities, possibilities, favourable in front of the revolutionary forces are limited and keeping quiet the issue is that of taking initiative and finding out how one can get out of the situation. Because this is now a very concrete necessity. So, in what sense can this be dealt with?

K. Murali: I don't think that the situation is one where that force is limiting itself. What I pointed out is that it is intervening in many forms. And it is precisely keeping in mind this reality of its intervening in many ways that the state has gone for large scale arrests of human rights activists and their imprisonment. The Elgar Parishad case has come up in that context only because they doubt that this force is behind this Elgar Parishad. How is it possible that all these nearly 200 organisations got united in Maharashtra? It's a unity that has never been seen before. The only Maoist contact which could be seen among those forces is a matter of one or two individuals. But then how did such a big unity take place? So, the State doubts that the revolutionary forces have made some intervention. Whatever that might be, there is a reality that is existing here, a material context that has developed here. It is a material context which allows these forces to unite, which demands that they unite. Someone takes the initiative. And it takes form. You know that the *Savarna* forces attacked this. But what is more important than that is the Bandh that took place throughout Maharashtra in response to it. The *Dalits*' call for a bandh became a totally unexpected success. Even in such far off remote places like Gadchiroli it was implemented. So the Bandh was successful. Thousands and thousands of youth came out on the streets. All of this has frightened the ruling classes like anything and that is why they have gone for such large-scale arrests. When that took place, many of the forces withdrew saying they were not related to it. That is something natural. Whenever suppression comes, there will be forces who vacillate, withdraw. But no matter what, this material situation exists here and attempts to intervene in this material situation and push it in a certain direction are also taking place. What I pointed out is that these attempts are taking place in an indirect manner.

On Violence

Question: The anti-fascist fronts or alternate political movements present in Keralam have the stand that they will not unite with any party that includes

violence in its political activity.

K. Murali: Yes, this was there earlier too.

Question: In these circumstances, non-state political violence is treated on the same level as state violence or equated with it. The issue is posed in terms of a binary violence/non-violence. In this situation, how will a united front be possible?

K. Murali: Whatever may be the way in which this issue of violence and non-violence is formulated, though the stand is taken that their problem is with violence, essentially it reveals a reformist view. What I am pointing out is that a material situation cutting through that reformism is taking form here. Whatever someone or the other might say, tomorrow they or their ranks will be forced to take it up. That is certain. Because the attack that is coming from the opposite side is of that nature. Moreover, it is inevitable that people will become aware of this attack and understand that it has to be confronted with violence. Therefore I consider this situation you mentioned as a transient case of reformism. These sorts of things were seen earlier too. They are not new.

Question: The issue goes beyond this binary of violence/non-violence. Violence brings up some ethical issues. I am talking about state violence. If we look at the political history of the world, over the past 50 or 70 years, one can see state violence of an unprecedented type, never seen before that. Violence that could be termed as genocide has taken place. One can see this in Indonesia and South American countries. How can we face up to this type of a state? Can we practice a liberatory politics by reacting violently to it? Because we would only be able to communicate with a person who understands this politics you are talking about or who responds to it in a creative manner. In a space where such communication does not take place, how will we do it?

K. Murali: Exploitative states have never entered into debate with revolutionary forces. This is something we can see right from the times of Spartacus. They were crucified. There was no question of communicating with them. That was so because it is a question of two classes. Either this class will finish off that one, or the opposite will happen. There is no question of communication or debate. The second point is that of this massacre of the masses. If we look at it from a historical perspective can we say that it is

something new? Something that actually took place only after the Second World War? New methods to isolate and suppress the masses, interning them in concentration camps and so on, have been introduced. Apart from that these large-scale massacres have been taking place all along. Take the case of the suppression of the Waziris by the British colonialists. Weren't they using aerial bombing? Weren't they being attacked by their air force? They did the same thing during the Quit India movement too. Debating with Gandhi was not the main thing for the British. The main thing was that of suppressing people who rebelled against them. They have never hesitated to employ violent methods to the maximum for this. They have not hesitated to carry out massacres. Further, when we speak about the armed struggle waged by a revolutionary force against a state it is never the case that this armed force will grow and grow, become big and then swallow the state. That is not how it happens. That state will collapse. Cracks will develop within it. This force that is propping it up, its army, police and so on, aren't they the common masses? They will rebel and break away. Speaking historically this is what happened everywhere. Whether the Russian revolution, the Chinese revolution or the Vietnamese revolution, wherever revolutions took place, they won final victory when the states they were confronting got caught in the grip of widespread internal crisis and the forces propping them up broke away. So it won't be the case of having to confront and finish off this state altogether.

Question: What I am pointing out is that the violence carried out by states today is being informed with lessons learnt from those revolutions. Propaganda infrastructure and annihilation aimed at total isolation from the masses are being used. How far can this sort of an apparatus be resisted with arms? The experiences of the past 50 years are not encouraging. In Latin America movements like the FARC in Columbia, the NPA in the Philippines, Shining Path of Peru, Naxalbari in India, all of them have the record of facing military suppression. Counter-revolutionary suppression is being carried out in a systematic, scientific way. In this sort of a situation shouldn't one think about the possibility of an alternate political practice? As was pointed out by the Civil Liberties Committee leader of Andhra Pradesh, Balagopal, those killed were the best products of those societies. Who is there to replace them? Whole leaderships are being finished off.

K. Murali: Yes, it's true that Balagopal had made such an observation. But

after that so many more new people have come up in that society. They have taken up leadership responsibilities. This is inevitable. The development of these new people to leadership is related to a material context. To say that the people of the '70s were super-intelligent, super-revolutionary, that quality and caliber is not seen after that, is meaningless. They took up the particularities of that period. When it was repressed new forces came up. The new are coming with a new awareness. So this is a historical necessity. Then about the movements you mentioned, among them the People's War under the leadership of the Communist Party of the Philippines and the People's War led by the CPI (Maoist) in India, these are the two People's Wars initiated in the 1967-70 period and continuing even today. They have persisted. As far as the Philippines is concerned, there is the direct intervention of American imperialism; the State has always received all sorts of military aid from the US. Unlike what has been faced by the revolutionary forces here, they had to face helicopter attacks and a lot of stuff like that. They have succeeded in overcoming this and persisting. They have also succeeded in extending. According to the latest reports, they had succeeded in spreading out to all the islands of the Philippines. That is a country of more than 700 islands. That is what I knew four or five years back—they must have extended further by now. There is suppression in India. At one point the State had claimed that the Maoist movement had been completely wiped out from Andhra. But now once again they themselves are admitting in the newspapers that CPI (Maoist) squads are active in the northern parts of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Similarly, there has been an extension in the tri-juncture of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand, that took place after 2015. That is, we must recollect that this development took place after ten years of Operation Green Hunt. It took place at a time when there were CRPF, BSF camps every five kilometers. So what I am saying is that this growth and development is taking place at a new level. They cannot block it. This is what we should pay attention to. We must register the stability and persistence it displays.

Question: In view of new technology and surveillance methods how far is this concept of People's War practical? Using Google Maps and similar things the State is able to gather exact details about a person or area quite quickly. Or else the spread from one area to another is blocked, a sort of a tying down.

K. Murali: No, that's what I explained. I just pointed out that they haven't

been able to tie them down. Despite mobilising such a huge force and deploying CRPF, BSF camps every three or four kilometers they couldn't do it. More than 10,000 troops have been added after the first Modi government came to power. Despite that this extension took place after that, during 2015-2018. So the facts show that they are not able to tie them down. This is something they themselves admit. Besides that, what is a People's War? A war carried out by relying on the masses is known as People's War. This is not something dependent on the technological capacity of the enemy. New methods will have to be devised to face up to the new problems posed by that technology. But then that is not something new. New obstacles caused by this technology have come up in every period. For example, when British imperialism used helicopters and planes against the Waziri's guerrilla war, wasn't that new technology? Till then they were confronting a ground-based enemy. Now it is coming from the skies and bombing. Initially quite a few of them must have been killed. Then they will adapt to it. They will seek out methods to face up to this. What was the method adopted by the Chinese People's Liberation Army to protect themselves from the aerial attacks of US planes during the Korean War? They would station people on top of faraway mountains and they would signal. That signal would be quickly transmitted from one to another. So the challenges posed by technology were always present. During the Vietnam War the US had developed technology to locate Viet Cong fighters and bomb them by the smell of their urine. But finally, who lost that war? Weren't they the ones who lost?

Question: This brings us to the issue of the condition of a cult of violence. That eliminates the ethics put forward by a liberatory politics. Or it gets totally lost in this process of violence. In Sri Lanka the LTTE had acquired a capability equal to the Sri Lankan army. But one cannot ignore the criticism that it got transformed into a purely military machine.

K. Murali: The LTTE was not a Maoist force. It had nationalist positions. Moreover, there were many issues with its organisational setup and its views. The status it gave to Prabhakaran's leadership and such things. For example its policy that those captured should commit suicide. No communist party has ever demanded of its fighters that they should commit suicide. The communist party teaches its ranks to face up to the enemy while in prison. Not to commit suicide as soon as they are caught. That

is the communist party or a revolutionary party adopts this approach precisely because it values human life. The violence carried out by a communist party has always upheld an ethical ideal. Because it employs violence to create a new society. What type of ethics will that society need, what type of ethics is it trying to generate? That must certainly be a part of the war, of the People's War it is leading, its army and all the activities it carries out among the masses it mobilises. Take for example Mao's famous Three and Eight Principles. What can be done, what must not be done. The directions on behaving with masses. All of this reflects that.

We can see so many examples of this in the history of the Russian and Chinese revolutions. It can also be seen in our own experiences. Then about what is characterised as a cult of violence, we must remember that violence is an inseparable part of life. When we say that we are living peacefully, there are no issues, no fighting, the reality is that we are living right in the midst of violence. The ruling classes that exist here, their exploitation, their caste oppression, women's oppression, male chauvinism, aren't all of these incidences of violence? What sense does it make to say that violence takes place only when someone gets hit? So this violence is something that is there throughout society. It is present in every pore of it. There is no society here that is free from it. That is impossible. Should we confront it and try to eliminate it or should we try to live by conforming to it? That is the question before us. When it is said that you are introducing the politics of violence here, that's not what is needed and so on, the violence that is actually present here is covered up. That was the biggest fraud of Gandhi's non-violence. Because the violence that exists throughout society is covered up. That was not solely a matter of British domination.

Part 4

The Socialist Societies

Question: We must now take up the topic of communist practice, of communist experience. Particularly the Soviet and Chinese experiences. Looking back today, even while it's true that a lot of problems faced by the masses were resolved, they have an utterly disappointing record. What are the prospects of taking the communist project forward today, its possibility remaining within those models?

K. Murali: First of all I totally disagree with the opinion that they were

utterly disappointing. It's actually the opposite. I'm not just asserting this. The accounts of Russia and China in those days, the period when they stood firmly on a revolutionary path, about the changes that took place in people's lives, not just getting a lot of comforts but the changes that took place in their values, all that demonstrated the creation of a new society. It demonstrated the creation of a new society and new values never before seen in this world. Take the numerous books that are now coming out on the Cultural Revolution and so on; they give very clear examples of how the Cultural Revolution transformed people's lives, how it raised them to a new level, to a new level of social consciousness. Yes, there were problems. Mistakes took place. But to characterise them as utterly disappointing, ignoring the gains they achieved, in my view that would be an absolutely erroneous approach.

Question: I'm not trying to reduce the positive gains which have been achieved due to the socialist revolution, but mistakes have taken place which overshadow these aspects. These mistakes cannot be rejected or set aside easily. One could even say that these societies failed because of these mistakes. One could say these are the challenges facing any communist society in the future.

K. Murali: Yes, they cannot be reduced in their gravity, we must learn from them and seek out methods of overcoming them. But I don't think that those mistakes were such that they overshadow the positive aspects. Because what they tried to do was create a new type of society which has never before existed in the world. Therefore we must certainly take that into consideration. We must also take into consideration the historical limitations. The first experience of Russia, or the developments in China, for example. An objective analysis in valuation would only be possible when the gains and the losses are understood and analysed from a historical perspective. And when that is done, the gains easily outweigh the errors. They have certainly succeeded in creating a new value system, something never seen in the world. They have proved that things earlier considered as impossible are quite possible. That is why I say that the gains stand out.

Secondly, I do not agree that the mistakes made there were responsible for their being overthrown. There has been a very specific issue of the seizure of power. The seizure of power by the new capitalist forces who grew up in that society was itself the most decisive thing that brought

about a qualitative change. The change from Mao to Deng Xiaoping in China was not something about weaknesses. Rather it was a seizure of power by the new capitalist class that emerged in Chinese society. Therefore the change that took place after that, the shift from the central slogan of "serving the people" to "there is nothing bad in making money" [put forward by Deng], this is a change from one value system to the capitalist value system. It is incompatible with socialism. Beyond internal weakness, what is decisive is this seizure of power

Question: Isn't this seizure of power itself something that has emerged from internal weakness?

K. Murali: No, not weakness, but an inevitability. Because, when the old exploiting classes are eliminated, as Marx and others have pointed out, bourgeois right does not cease to exist in society. They give rise to a new capitalist class which becomes the basis within socialism for a new capitalism. This is something that was pointed out as a new understanding. Therefore this is something that has emerged from the transition to socialism itself. It is not a weakness. Rather it is something that will be there along with it. Recognising this and taking up the struggle against it was an awareness achieved by the communist movement during Mao's period. During Lenin's or Stalin's period, the communist movement did not have this awareness. Therefore all of these attempts were understood as sabotage carried out by the reactionary forces of the country under the instigation of imperialism.

Quite opposite to this, during the period of the Cultural Revolution, the title of an important ideological essay was "How is it that those who were revolutionaries in the new democratic revolution stage have become counter-revolutionaries in the socialist revolution stage?" The same people who then played a role in the revolution have changed to a counter-revolutionary role today—why is that? This essay attempts to analyse the material basis of this transition taking up the issue of bourgeois right. Which is why I say this is not a matter of weakness, but something that inevitably comes up. Then, so far as the matter of the political right to express yourself and all that is concerned, there are a lot of new things that emerged during the Cultural Revolution. The right of people to express their opinion, the right to strike as a constitutional right were accepted in a socialist country for the first time. The reasoning till then was that the state is that of the

proletariat, and therefore there was no necessity for the proletarian class to carry out struggle against institutions of its own. Contrary to this, the understanding that there is a contradiction between the management and workers and the narrow interests of the management could become anti-worker, was achieved during Mao's period. That was the basis on which the right to strike was incorporated after the Cultural Revolution. The right to openly criticise and so on, several novel democratic rights, these were certainly a success.

This naturally brings up the question of whether it was complete, or whether it fulfilled all the necessities, or was that enough? No, we certainly have to go beyond that. But we must always remember that, compared to the societies before it, this society is a period of transition. Socialism is not the ultimate aim, rather this is a period of transition. And during the transition period, on the one hand, the state is a necessity, on the other it has to head towards a situation where the state becomes unnecessary. If this contradiction is to be handled, there has to be an understanding of how this orientation will be maintained by the proletariat. This particular task will come up there.

This is true of all states, of all ruling classes, it is an essential question. For example, in a capitalist society, it is through the permanent bureaucracy, army, judiciary and such institutions that the bourgeois class ensures the continuity of its class interests. Political parties may change through elections, one or the other may be in government, but continuity is ensured by these institutions. These institutions cannot be relied upon in a socialist society. They are institutions that are alienated from the masses. Then what can one rely upon? That is where the issue of the party comes up. This is how the understanding comes of the party's control or monopoly of power. But that itself raises new questions. Because once that comes, then the changes that take place in the party, the monopolist nature it acquires, or the bureaucracy that grows within the party as a result of this, the situation where it gets alienated from the masses, all these were important topics during the Cultural Revolution. A lot of changes were brought about in that period, but at the same time it couldn't be abandoned altogether, and remained as a challenge. What I would like to stress is that there is no point in blaming that there was no democracy there, or this and that wasn't there, while ignoring this material reality. These are issues that come up as a result of this change, so both they and the resolution must be seen in that

way. This is what is to be done in the new context. The duty before us is to take up things from where it has ended and forge ahead.

Question: These types of internal contradictions of the communist project can come up in the construction of socialism in the future also. There is an argument that this reflects the philosophical inadequacy of Marxism, and in that sense, Marxism itself has become obsolete. Though these arguments have come up in Europe in the 1970s itself, they came up in Keralam after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the '90s. In Keralam's context, this argument found acceptability as postmodernism. As a result of the upsurge of these postmodern ideas, Marxism has been thoroughly pushed to the back-foot. How do you look at this situation with your understanding of Maoism?

K. Murali: The setback that took place in the socialist societies, and its reasons were analysed by Mao on the basis of the basic positions of Marxism itself. These are not problems of the philosophical inadequacy of Marxism. In an interim period, mechanical thinking did indeed influence/dominate Marxism. A linear way of understanding things was predominant. Mao was able to rupture from that and develop a new orientation. And that is why there was a development of ideology from Marxism-Leninism to Maoism. That is why we say there has been an advance. Therefore Mao was able to analyse the problems of the Soviet economy on the basis of this new Marxist philosophical understanding, on the basis of which he could give leadership to new experiments, new advances in China. In a certain sense, he was also perhaps able to go back to the issues raised by Marx and Engels in the early period which had been back peddled. The question of eliminating the difference between the countryside and the cities, or between physical and mental labour, and so on. All of these were focused on as central issues. They were defined once again as central tasks of the social revolution. Of course, we see mention of all these in Lenin and Stalin, but they were not given as much importance. There was also an understanding in this period that it was not sufficient to develop productive forces in any manner, but continuous changes have to be brought about in the production relations, the superstructure. The Cultural Revolution, for example, why was it characterised as such? If one looks at the books that have appeared dealing with the GPCR, particularly the one written by Dongping Han, he points out that it was trying to tackle a cultural consciousness, a mental setup, of being slavish towards those in

power. Challenging it and attempting to smash it was the central task of the GPCR, a cultural change. A matter of smashing the mentality of bowing before power, or subjecting oneself to it.

Question: You mean, a culture of accepting power in an unquestioning manner?

K. Murali: Yes, the need to smash that. The power is for the people, and therefore they should have the right to question it and control it. Another point he mentions is how Mao's works, his quotations and all that, started to play the role of an undeclared constitution. A situation emerged where officials and others in positions began to be examined in that light. Mao taught that you must serve the people, but what are you doing; Mao said like this, but what are you doing and so on. So these changes have come precisely on the basis of Marxist political philosophy. It was not by keeping it aside, or overcoming its limitations, rather it emerged by developing it. But of course that is not to say that there are no issues at the philosophical level at all. There are many answers to be found. New developments and awareness are necessary in accordance with the new times, in such matters like the concept of party and all that. Regarding postmodernism as a philosophical approach, firstly one must note that it is not a unified thing. It is a terminology representing a broad collection of thinking.

One of the things I have felt in this regard is that if we take a close look at its sources, we see that it is coming up in relation to the struggle against mechanism itself, the mechanical understanding that was dominant in Marxism. Its sources are related to the criticisms which came up against this. Structuralism, post-structuralism, Althusser, there is an interrelated development. One can see that so far as Europe is concerned, many of the proponents or theoreticians of postmodernism are on the Left, take part in movements against the state, in issues related to immigrants and immigrant workers. They stand for protecting them and directly participate energetically in some of the struggles, quite unlike the postmodernists we see here. Theirs is of an opposite nature; it is a justification to withdraw from anti-state struggles, struggles in support of the masses. A convenient way of avoiding all this. There it was quite different. The reason why it was different over there is because I think postmodernism challenges and shakes up many of our concepts and views. In a certain sense, it creates a space for looking at things from a different angle. And precisely that is what

has attracted not only intellectuals but also youth from the petit-bourgeois sections: its quality of destabilising accepted positions.

Such destabilising, in my view, is good. New awareness and developments have emerged from this destabilisation at the philosophical level. In my opinion, Marxism is capable of incorporating these destabilisations, if not the views and positions they put forward. Rather, by addressing these destabilisations, Marxism would be able to reexamine its own positions. For example, the question of class, or the party. I have tried to examine these questions in the recent period. This sort of an enquiry is coming from various angles. Some articles of Alain Badiou that I have read indicate that he has now changed a little from his earlier positions. In an earlier period he had arrived at a position that the party itself is the problem. In his article criticising Sarkozy, he argued that the old type of party, or the communist party, has become irrelevant now. In a recent essay, he raises the necessity of a new type of party. Such enquiries are now taking place from different angles—how can the communist project be made a success/reality? This probing is something that has to be continued.

The Communist Party

Question: In one of your writings I have seen you point out how the communist party is not the final word on all knowledge. It is not the party which has to carry out everything. This approach is something different from the understanding of the communist party we had till now; the party as the ultimate answer to everything, the completeness of all knowledge.

K. Murali: Firstly, I'd like to point out that I'm not the first person to put this idea forward. It has come up from among Maoist circles quite earlier. There is a thinking that the communist party or Marxism is the last word of everything, that anything and everything can be explained by it. Yes, it is true, one can understand everything in the light of Marxism, but it cannot replace them. For example, the laws of physics have to be understood in terms of the science of physics and established as such. It is not something we can answer with Marxism. Marxist dialectics can certainly play its role in analyzing the laws of physics and explain its conceptual positions. It can give a direction to this. Many scientists have done this. This issue, that the communist party is not something that should be doing everything, emerges from the basic positions of the communist movement itself.

How did Marx, for example, develop his ideas? He did it by studying the various theoretical positions that were existing then, critically examining and synthesising from them. He never said all of this was said by me for the first time. But he identified the contradictions in them, and in order to overcome that he supplied certain ideas. Marx and Engels came to know of Morgan's and others new understanding after the theoretical positions of Marxism had been developed. And they accepted that; they never said that Marxism has given the explanation of Darwin's evolution theory. Rather, what they said is that Darwin's evolution theory confirms what we have said, it is an affirmation, or that Morgan's anthropological findings confirm Marxist dialectical approach. In the Communist International, we have the words "we don't want saviors from above The communist party can never become a savior. Its duty is to make the people conscious, to be their guide, to function as the vanguard of the revolution. We must also keep in mind that all sections of the oppressed masses were made aware of their rights as human beings mainly through the activities of the communist parties. That is an irrefutable truth. Whether you look at Keralam or elsewhere, we can see that as a fact.

Question: Do you mean to say that a party assists or helps in bringing forward that sort of a political agency?

K. Murali: I'm not saying it is done only by the communist party, but the main role was that of the communist party. Whether India, Europe, America, or other third world countries, this is a fact. The role that the communist party played in building up the trade union movement in America is incontrovertible, unchallengeable. There are a lot of stories, historical records of the types of oppression they suffered to achieve this. But that is not today's world. Through one's own experiences, the changes that have taken place in the world, different sections of the people are quite aware of their own situation, the oppression they are suffering, of exploitation. It need not necessarily be a perfect understanding, but there is an awareness. Some of my basic needs are being denied and I'm a person who is being oppressed, whether as a women, *Dalit*, *Adivasi*, or as religious minority. All these social sections are having this specific understanding of how their rights are being denied. All of this awareness is now existing in society and this is a good thing.

The communists no longer have the task of going and making dif-

ferent sections of the people aware of the oppression they suffer. But then, the communists do have some duties in this regard. Because today, all of these forces are limiting themselves to their own issues and struggles. It is necessary to make them conscious that their issues cannot be resolved in that manner. It is necessary to make them conscious of the state, of political power and the central role of the ruling classes, and thereby attract them into the overall revolutionary struggle. Here too, there is a specific issue. Agitation on a specific issue, for example a struggle against a mining quarry, a good chunk of participants would not have any interest in politics. Most probably they would not be interested in MLM politics at all. They would be understanding their struggle as an apolitical one. But what is their struggle doing in effect? What is the effect of that anti-quarry struggle in society? One effect is that it is preventing these anti-human, anti-people, anti-nature attacks. On the other hand, a new consciousness is created in society through the struggle. Whether or not they may be desiring this individually, subjectively, in effect they are becoming participants in creating a new democratic consciousness in society. They are participating in that, and that is something that a communist party should welcome.

Caste Annihilation or Reform

Question: While discussing the situation in Keralam and India, something that has to be repeated again and again is caste. So far as an individual suffering caste oppression is concerned, whether man or women, the issue is that of a specific type of oppression. They resist on that basis. If that situation changes, their approach to that struggle will also change. They now have this feeling that nobody needs to be our saviors, we will deal with these issues on our own. What will be the role of communist parties in this situation?

K. Murali: This matter of resolution, not relief but resolution, of eliminating caste altogether, that is something that is impossible so long as the state and the ruling classes exist. If this is to be really resolved, they have to inevitably come to the path of revolution. That is to be pointed out. It is not that the communist party will come as a savior in their struggle, but rather, to point out to them that they will have to take up the path of revolution. It is something they will have to take up today or tomorrow. For example, here in Keralam, when the *Adivasis* took up struggles under

Janu's leadership, some leftist circles had an approach of characterising that as a struggle organised by NGO organisations. But that was not our position. What we saw was that after a very long time an oppressed section of Keralam has come to the path of struggle, under her leadership, on a very basic necessity, on the question of land and are standing firm on that. That was decisive. Not the question of what the individuals leading them had in mind or have in mind. Definitely, it brought back attention to the most basic land question existing here, and gave a new impulse to the issue. That is how the issue has to be approached. In those days we carried out a lot of propaganda in support of their struggle. This was not done under their invitation. We never tried to take up or replace that struggle. On our part, we got involved in other activities related to that issue. But there was the question of how we should approach and understand that struggle. This is what I'm trying to point out.

Question: There is a criticism that this approach is repeating that old communist understanding that all the issues will be resolved after revolution.

K. Murali: That is what I pointed out, what do you mean by resolution? Is it a relief? Then that is possible before revolution. Reform is possible. If it is a matter of resolution, then no. Is it possible to end caste through such agitations? No. If we are to annihilate caste, not be satisfied with adjustments or reforms, then the social system has to be totally changed. That is something possible only through a revolutionary process. The people's war in Nepal, for example, during the period of its strong advance, there was a big change in the caste relations of that country.

Question: Yes, but now it is being said that all of it has come back.

K. Murali: Sure, that will happen. Because that path was abandoned and they turned to parliamentary politics, abandoning people's war. That is how the setback happened. There is a dynamic created by war. This dynamic prepares the way for caste annihilation. This did not come up on its own. There were conscious ideological interventions and moves taken up in order to ensure that. There are also activities that have to be continued through the cultural revolution. I'm not arguing that all of this is something that will take place spontaneously, on its own. But decisive change takes place there. The direction of caste annihilation was clearly

seen after the 1990s. When I went there and talked to *Dalit* comrades in that party they were clearly expressing that. The new position, the new acceptances they are getting in society and their new interactions with people of other castes, and the changes that took place because of this, they were clear. That did not continue and got drained away slowly, with the old situation coming back.

Part 5

Marxism and the Environmental Question

Question: Just like the caste question, the environmental issue is yet another thing that questions the very essence of Marxism. It is said that the development perspective of Marxism is not different from that of capitalism. The criticism is that both of them put forward a concept of unlimited development. What is your opinion?

K. Murali: This is certainly an important question for Marxism to resolve. During Marx and Engels' time, they had put forward some very fundamental views on environmental questions and on the relationship between humankind and nature. For example, there is something Engels had pointed out—Man thinks he is the master of nature and with this understanding he brings about changes in nature. But, ultimately, by delivering a sharp blow, nature teaches him that the truth is something else and it itself is the master. Similarly, Marx has spoken about the metabolic relation between humankind and nature. He has pointed out how capitalism destroys the productivity of land. There are a lot of fundamental observations like this, but it is also a fact that these insights of Marxism later got excluded from the central issues of the communist movement, of the communist project, the construction of socialism. They were not, of course, totally excluded, but they were also not developed further with the same importance.

Later, one sees a certain comeback of these topics in the experiences of China under Mao's leadership. They were not, of course, approached as issues of the environment but rather as that of ending the differences between agriculture and industry, between cities and the countryside. And it is from these sorts of basic fundamental issues, issues pointed out by Marx, that Mao tried to develop an alternative view on the socialist economy. This is also related to the critique of the Soviet experiences. And as

part of that, the concept of local self-reliance, of utilising waste products in an effective manner, concepts about organic agriculture, all of this came up in China during that period. As I pointed out earlier, they were not advanced as part of a new awareness on the environmental question, but were arrived at from a different angle. Some new understandings/ideas about a decentralised economy were also advanced. This can be seen in the commune concept. One sees the interlinking of agriculture and industry, and similarly that of the city and the rural, in it. In some of the industrial models highlighted during that period, it was pointed out how an oil mining area was also retained as agricultural land. So this certainly was a beginning. It contains a lot of things from which we can go forward. But at the same time it is also necessary to examine why it was not sustained as a central task, despite Marxism having fundamental insights in this matter. This is certainly a question that remains to be resolved. I will mention some things that struck me while thinking over this, of course more study is required.

What I noted is the issue of the socialisation brought about by capitalism in the field of production. Whether within a country or at the global level or at the sites of production itself, i.e. in the factories, this socialisation was a step forward as far as society was concerned when compared to the disparate and unconnected relations that used to exist during the feudal period. It has played a major role in the development of the working class. Such socialisation is still continuing and still developing. It was said that the change that will take place is one where, taking this socialisation as a basis, the exploiters are finally eliminated and society takes it over. But when things are put forward in these terms, a question comes up: can we accept the socialisation that had come up in the capitalist period as such? I believe that that is exactly where the problem lies. For example, in Soviet Russia, the Taylorist methods developed in America were accepted as a model in the efforts made to build up a new economy under Lenin and others' leadership. That method addressed the task of how production can be developed maximum. The socialisation that developed during the capitalist period would certainly be one in which its profit motive is inherent. Therefore it would be one in which alienation and other problems are contained. Therefore the basic question whether it can be used as such comes up. In the light of the Paris Commune experiences, it was learned that the old state cannot be taken over by the proletariat and run. It was

understood that it had to be smashed and a new one had to be established. Marx arrived at this new understanding through this experience.

Similarly, I think that the necessity of smashing the old socialisation, the necessity of fundamentally transforming it, and developing a new one, is a task coming up before us. Certain indications of this can be seen in Mao's "Critique of Soviet Economics When it speaks about production relations inside the factory, between the management and the workers, it is putting forward something different from what was accepted till that period. The management are communist party members, the factory is public property, and the state is that of the proletariat. So then why should there be contradictions here? But that was not how Mao approached the question. He began to examine the question by accepting that there are contradictions there. Unless those contradictions are resolved, real social ownership would not be achieved. What would be existing would only be formal social ownership. What I'm saying is that Mao gives us a direction we can take up while examining this question. In the present period, in the light of development of science and technology, we could possibly conceive of economies which are at the same time decentralised and also interlinked. This is of course not the same as what Gandhi and all said of retaining what existed earlier, neither is it a question of considering the small as beautiful. Rather in an interrelated manner, both decentralised and interconnected. Developing a concept of an economy having this characteristic is what I think needs to be done.

Question: The indications being given by tech are that production set-ups at a very local level are quite possible. There are a number of Marxists who insist that a communist project that ignores the environment is impossible. They have abandoned all such concepts like unbridled or unlimited development of the productive forces. They also question concepts where material abundance of consumption is presented as development. Particularly, the understanding that development means arriving at par with Western industrial models is what is questioned. Such fundamental issues are coming up in countries like India too. So what type of socialisation would be possible?

K. Murali: In my opinion, a model of socialisation where you have decentralised production and at the same time interconnections is possible. The commune model of China is an example. It was a decentralised entity as well as a power center and a production, consumption, social center too.

Such new types of social organisation are possible.

Question: Isn't this what Gandhi meant by "gram swaraj?"

K. Murali: To speak about the specific features of Gandhi's "gram swaraj" concept, first, he glorifies them. This is an approach which hides or refuses to accept its backwardness, its anti-human character. Secondly, when Gandhi was writing this, there was an approach of thinking that technology and industrialisation themselves are the problem. Actually the fact is that society is able to arrive at this understanding today precisely because of this industrialisation and technological development. True there were people who wrote about environmental issues back then as well, but the understanding we have of this issue today was absent then—scientific knowledge had not developed to that extent, it was not possible to achieve the understanding we have today. I want to point out that as far as human development is concerned, the very nature of human beings is that of seeking out the new. That is a human characteristic and that is how human society has developed. Today when we carry out something, we should be doing it with an environmental concern of the impact it will probably create. And that will bring about a change in how we do it.

When we say unlimited development, what sort of development is meant by that? Serving whom? Such fundamental questions come up. For example, when Mao was criticising the theory of productive forces, he was criticising the understanding of the capitalist roaders that the task or target should be that of developing the productive forces somehow or the other. He was insisting that the changes brought about in productive relations and the superstructure are decisive. Because we are trying to develop a new society and what is decisive is that new values corresponding to it are also created. It is not sufficient that production is somehow increased. There used to be a famous Chinese slogan, "While the rockets are going up, the Red Flag is falling down That is not what is needed, both should go up in tandem. What was meant by Red Flag is the new values necessary for the new society. Technology is also necessary and we also need the new values. Today in that new value system, we should include environmental awareness.

Question: There is an unevenness caused by global capitalism. One cannot compare the living standards and conditions in third world countries with

that existing in the industrially advanced West. Therefore world leaders quite often present development as an attraction before the people. The Modi fascist government is also presenting such aspirations before the people and, to a great extent, it has an impact, particularly among the middle classes.

K. Murali: Not just the middle classes, it is also impacting the basic masses. Can't we approach this question on the basis of social awareness? Washing machines, fridges, etc. reduce the drudgery of housework beyond doubt. Is it necessary for every family to have one? Can't this be something maintained collectively? There are so many such possibilities. There is no need to exclude technology altogether. What are the changes possible within it? It is quite possible to achieve new advances in the best manner, even while greatly reducing the use of electricity and such inputs.

Question: If we examine the history of environmental movements in India, there is something which stands out. There is a trend which argues that one must seek out a path specific to India different from that of Western experiences. The noblisation of Gandhi's alternate model is part of that. It can also be characterised as some sort of localism. In Kumarappa's books, for example, he says we can avoid the crisis we see in Western capitalism or we can avoid its impacts. How do you understand this?

K. Murali: I have read Kumarappa's book and felt that it is very superficial. The examples given by the book, you can see the superficiality. The approach he takes is that of imposing certain concepts he has without considering social reality. We certainly had a lot of specific things that had been developed here, but the question is the extent to which they will be useful today. Certainly they should be made useful. But there is also the fact that a social system called capitalism has emerged at the world level, an industrial revolution has taken place, and that has brought about a lot of changes, including electricity. All of this is reality. It would be foolish to reject all of this just because it is Western.

I think that we should follow what Mao said, "make foreign things serve national needs" and "make the old serve the new For example, in Rayalaseema, there was an irrigation method that existed in the olden days. At the top of the hills, they used to make small tanks arranging stones and collecting rainwater. This would flow down naturally through gravity. Along the canals they would carry out paddy agriculture, and further away

other crops that require less water, and then groundnuts. So through this mixed agriculture method, they used the water to the maximum extent. Whatever remains would get collected at the bottom, where it would remain for some time. The moisture in surrounding areas would be utilised for paddy cultivation. There were similar methods in Bihar and Bengal, relying on ponds. If all these can be revived, that would be good—a development in accordance to our modern necessities.

What happens is that solutions imposed by the World Bank, etc. are seen as *the* solutions. What was their necessity? Develop Coastal Andhra as a paddy production center. They insisted that all water should be diverted to that area. The World Bank insisted that the sole river flowing in Rayalaseema, the Pennar River, was not to be used there. The logic? Some calculations which had no relations to real life. It was a comparison between the dry mass produced while using a million liter of water for paddy with that produced by groundnut farming, demonstrating that the former was lesser than the latter. But the people there did not live by eating groundnuts, but rather rice. This never came up in the World Bank's considerations. All they were interested in was the water-dry mass ratio. So all the traditional methods were destroyed, the region was converted into a groundnut production area and it soon became a drought area. So some of these traditional methods are certainly revivable and usable. Our *pokkali* agriculture is another example, or the *kaippad* in the north. We should certainly use traditional methods. But if somebody says that this is the only way forward, that would be nonsense

Question: The matter of socialisation, which was mentioned earlier, comes up here. That is, there is also the matter of the exploitation that existed in relation to the traditional forms of agriculture.

K. Murali: Yes.

Question: So then there is the question of how exactly it should be revived.

K. Murali: That is something that has to be examined in relation to the new social system. There is a direction given by Mao, "the old should serve the new," "the foreign should serve the national needs That should give guidance. The old should not be brought back in a way that recreates the old caste relations and all that.

Part 6

Local Knowledge Systems and Colonialism

Question: In the context of what we're speaking about there is another thing that I would like to ask you. We see a lack of insight into the local knowledge systems on the part of the Indian Communist Party. If you look at Lenin's and Mao's writings, most of the theoretical conclusions are emphasising the particularities of their countries. But if you look at our history we do not see this. This is true about the ML movement also. So how do you understand this matter?

K. Murali: This certainly is a major lack—it is a fact. So far as the Indian communist movement is concerned, there is a lack of a beginning from our own basis, our own roots, and our own traditions. Rather, there is an absence of an effort to discover its own roots here. The examples used by Lenin and Mao are usually relied on to explain things. This certainly is a lack. An understanding about this has been gradually developing within the Maoist movement over the past few years, but that is not sufficient. It has to be further developed. There is a question of why this has happened. The influence of mechanical thinking certainly was a factor. That is beyond doubt. That surely was a factor.

There is also the influence of Gandhiism, which was apparent at the level of reformism. Because revolutionary radical thinking gradually takes us to our own traditions and to our roots. It is in this sense that I say that reformist ideas became a barrier. And if you look at the history of the undivided Communist Party, reformism was dominant within it for quite a long period. It was revisionism and reformism with a Gandhian tinge. Later it shifted to worship of Nehru. If you look at the history of the ML movement, which came after that, we can see that it used to make China the model, instead of starting from our own reality. It used to depend upon this.

There is another factor, which has been a reason. And this I think is the impact of colonialism. So far as we are concerned, colonial rule was not a short period. We are people who have gone through a colonial domination, covering a considerably long period. There has been a situation where our traditions and all that have been completely wiped away. This is an additional problem here. So you should examine the extent to which this has blocked the development of a local knowledge system. We

must examine the influence exerted by leadership and intellectuals that emerged, trained in Western education, literature and such things. Quite naturally Western models are taken as the guide in discussions and enquiries they are involved in.

Question: Has there been an approach that our past is too ancient, and there is no point in now taking it under consideration?

K. Murali: Yes, that too is there but that is not the only matter. There is the matter of its having been made ancient. This is not just a matter of our awareness. In other words, it is not just a matter of a lot of people blindly worshipping all that is Western. There is also the matter that our past, our traditions have been made ancient. There has been a situation where it has been pushed aside under the plea that it has got no relevance today. This is particularly visible at the level of philosophy. So far as South Asia is concerned, it had a very lively philosophical tradition. There used to be philosophical probings from various angles and lively debate among them. Just as you see in the historical development of Western philosophy, there was a philosophical history, a tradition, over here also. And it too had developed through interaction and controversies among the different schools.

For example, the *Mimamsakaras* used to criticise the *Vedantins* and the *Vedantins* used to criticise those following *Sankhya*. And in this mutual criticism, one section would take the arguments from another section and use it against a third. So this active debate and discourse used to exist here. This is something we can see all the way up to the 17th century. Even in the 17th century new research was taking place in philosophical schools like *Nyaya-Vaisheshika*.

People like Jonardon Ganeri have argued that these new developments can even be characterised as modern. But later, that was totally cut short. It never had any further role or continuity. Here the Chinese experience is different because China did not go through such a colonial domination. And therefore, so far as China is concerned, many of its traditions continued to remain active in life, at the level of education and all that. When Mao describes his own education, initially his schooling is in the old tradition. It is only when he reaches the level of university that he is able to understand new things. So the other, the old thing, remains as a base and the new also comes in. That is, the old is not completely excluded. And it is not an education which is solely and wholly Western. But that was

the condition here. We cannot ignore the impact that it created. What is interesting is that, in the midst of this blocking, at the philosophical level, it is only *Advaita* that got further sustenance.

Question: This is something that you pointed out in one of your essays. In the Indian philosophical world Advaita has been dominant only for a short period. Compared to the Jaina, Bauddha philosophies, the period of Advaita is very short. But Advaita has been upheld as the height of India's philosophical achievements and as a model in the later period.

K. Murali: In truth, so far as I've been able to understand from my reading, this is a product of colonialism. As I pointed out earlier, during the period that colonialism was tightening its grip, the main topic of discussion in the South Asian philosophical realm was not *Advaita*, but rather *Nyaya-Vaisheshika*. New developments were taking place in that school, and philosophers from various regions of this sub-continent would go to Varanasi to learn about that. They were not going there to learn *Advaita*. Then how is it that *Advaita* reached a position of prominence? I think colonialism has a role in that. The concepts of orientalism and all are a factor in this. And it is also to be examined to what extent the influence of Hegelian philosophy has played a role in this. Because it's possible to see some similarity between the Hegelian concept of absolute and that of *Advaita*, discounting some basic differences. Another matter is that colonialism opened up a new possibility before *Brahmanism*. This happened in two or three senses. First, when the British tried to learn about this society, they convened *Brahmin* intellectuals. So naturally, their ideas were presented as Hindu ideas. Explanations in terms of Hindu world outlook, Hindu religion, its theories, etc.

Question: Even the collation was done by Brahmins.

K. Murali: Along with that, the encouragement given to Sanskrit, and the initial advantage gained by *Brahmanism* because of this is also there. *Advaita* is a philosophical stand that is acceptable to *Brahminism* in all senses. In that sense also it has been a factor of impetus for it. Though *Advaita* has been celebrated as the highest, most noble, achievement of Indian philosophy, one does not see any new study or inquiry based on it. Apart from repeating what was said, there is no attempt to apply it

to understand or handle the issues we are facing, resolve social issues, or put forward a new interpretation for that. In other words, it is seen to be stagnant. There is an artificiality in this. When we examine Western schools, we see Plato and Aristotle are live topics even in the latest philosophical debates. This is not something artificially done by them. They are not saying there was a Plato, an Aristotle. Rather it's about some of the ideas put forward by Plato or Aristotle, where is the continuity, where is the rupture, how should it be interpreted today, these are coming up as topics of debate. New understanding, insights, and attempts to resolve issues that have come up in the philosophical field are taken up. That is not what we see here. We see no role being played by *Advaita* other than existing as some sort of a thing to be worshipped/idolised. Regarding the impact created by colonialism, the sort of ideas it gave rise to, we can see that our traditional, or rather, conservative, spokespersons of Marxism have accepted all of this as such, without criticism. We see, for example, EMS describing Adi Sankara as the Indian Hegel. There is no attempt to examine what it actually is. Actually, unlike this, in the Bhakti period *Basava*, and Baudha, *Jaina* philosophies even before that, had put forward radically different views.

Question: The Bhakti movement was in another sense a reflection or manifestation of the internal democratisation process that took place in India.

K. Murali: Yes, but not just that. Particularly at the level of philosophy there were different conceptualisations. In Basava, we see dialectical views, for example, the concept that all that moves will remain and that which stands will wither away. It was based on this understanding that Lingayat priests and preachers were instructed that they should not stay permanently in one place. They were not just putting out a philosophical position. They were opposed to building temples, because the land concentration existing then was connected to temples. The philosophy was related to social changes also. Retaining an organic monism and at the same time synthesising it with a dialectical viewpoint, this is what we see there. This is a region where a lot of developments have taken place. Without seeing all this, if we simply say that *Advaita* is the greatest philosophy, that its concept is similar to Hegel's absolute, such arguments reflect a very superficial understanding.

Question: Among those who have come to the ML movement, you are a person who has shown great interest in philosophical issues. Could you explain the background of this?

K. Murali: I doubt if I am the only one.

Question: No, there were others, certainly. But in Indian spirituality and similar issues, you have been more keen than others.

K. Murali: All that is a recent development. It is only after the 1980s that I took up such a study, particularly after the rise of the Sangh Parivar and the revival of *Brahmanism*. In those days, it was described as Hindu revivalism, becoming more and more explicit in Indira Gandhi's period. At the same time, we also had the Bhindranwale phenomena, there was a question whether revivalism and fundamentalism are the same. Also, how one should compare that with liberation theology. This is the context of my study of the matter. It is in this period that I started studying the Upanishads, Quran, Bible, etc. in the mid-'80s. I thought this would come up as a major issue. Before that I wasn't interested in all this. Later there was a continuity of that reading and in the 1990s I started to read and understand Narayana Guru and similar people.

Question: But in Narayana Guru, one sees a different thing. In his concepts, Advaita was important.

K. Murali: Yes, but in the social reform ideas that Narayana Guru put forward, in poetry and all that, he does not argue against caste by putting arguments based on Advaita. Rather, his arguments are completely based on the material. When he says that just as cows have cow-ism, humans have their human-ism, those who embrace and give birth are of one species, the other of another, etc. These are biological traits. Though in the end, he mentions Advaita, the main argument is not based on Advaita. He does not start from that. Everything is one and therefore there is no caste—that is not how he begins. He starts from biological reality and he goes on to say that there are no such caste differences among humans, only individual differences. Therefore, what is that Advaita he is speaking about? And there is another issue—the Vedanta during Bhakti period, to what extent is it related to Sankara's Advaita, and to what extent to Ramanuja's Vishishtadvaita? This has to be further studied. Though Narayana Guru cannot be

characterised as a Bhakti poet, it is also a fact that he has written a lot of prayers along with his philosophical works. So then, there is a question of how we have to understand this.

Question: The studies about all these schools and gaining awareness about them—what role would they play in the liberation politics of the present day?

K. Murali: The insights we get from our traditions is the most important thing, helping us to analyse and explain contemporary society. As I pointed out in one interview, take the case of Guru's idea that whatever one does for one's own happiness should also be of use for the other. This is definitely a communist concept a communist can completely agree with it. But what is required to make that a reality? It is not something that can happen because I desire for it. Here we have to address our material reality. They open up the doors to that recognition, give us direction to understand and explain this reality.

Question: During the CRC period, that is during the nineteen eighties, that is after the Emergency, the CRC, of which you too were part of, had gone ahead quite a bit compared to other ML groups, so far as political and philosophical issues were concerned. At the same time it is also said that it was a total failure, so far as practice was concerned.

K. Murali: Yes, that is correct.

Question: So how do you explain this? In the period after Emergency the CRC had developed in such a manner as though it represented all the expectations, all the energy, of the Malayalee youth. But soon it started breaking up. On the other hand, the movements in Andhra and Bihar, which did not attain such political or philosophical heights, could develop as a Maoist political force. So how do you explain this contradiction?

K. Murali: The erroneous understanding, or problems in understanding, that was there among the leadership of the CRC, CPI (ML), of which I too was a part, has played a decisive role in this. And this was there in its approach to practice and all these matters. It could never maintain consistency or firmness. Secondly, there is also the reality of the material conditions existing here, which was also a major factor. In this material context, in the particular material context of Keralam, how can a revolu-

tionary movement be built up, what are the problems we face, that was not how the issue was faced. On the contrary, I think it was in 1979, the State Committee adopted a resolution which tried to explain how we are to work in Keralam's context. On the one hand it was saying that there is a revolutionary situation in Keralam just like the rest of India, and on the other hand it was saying that to initiate armed struggle in Keralam one would first have to prepare the political context for that and for that one has to do mass activities and all that. These are contradictory ideas. If one accepts that there is a favourable material situation the task is not of preparing objective conditions but of preparing subjective forces. The former cannot be put forward as a precondition.

So if one looks at the ideological struggle in the organisation after that, one can see that the two sides were simply catching hold of the two ends of this argument and struggling against each other. Though both were emerging from a single position, one side would hold on to one aspect and the other side to the other aspect and debate whether the military line or the mass line was important. And the most curious thing that was seen was that those who were vehement proponents of the military line at one time would turn into proponents of the mass line later. And then those who would come upholding the military line against them would again later on turn into proponents of the mass line. One could see a continuity in this topsy-turvy business, right up till the '90s. So I think that the internal question here was the failure to define what exactly Keralam's particularity was. The reorganisation we tried to carry out in the '90s was precisely based on a review of all of this. And it is then that we started understanding these issues. So we came to understand that while it is correct to say that overall there is a revolutionary situation, there is also the question of the ebbs and flows in that situation related to the particularities of the economic situation existing here. And there is the question of the impact, the influence, this creates on people's consciousness. So there is a question regarding the extent to which a revolutionary movement can win over people to revolutionary positions.

The Naxalites are acceptable to the masses, but on the basis that they are honest and so on. But only up till the extent of carrying out reformist tasks. They were seen as some sort of a moral alternative. And at the same time their presence was utilised to gain some things by the masses. There are so many experiences like this. One can see a hesitation here to go

beyond a level of reforms and to take up revolutionary positions. Because the material conditions did not demand that. On the other hand there are situations or contexts where that became a necessity. During the period of 2000-2004 Keralam passed through a very critical economic situation. And during that period we could see a striking difference in the response and approach of the masses. Compared to the situation of the '90s where we had to fight hard to make even a small advance, in the new situation we were able to gain rank and file in a very fast manner on the basis of revolutionary positions itself. But the fact is that the necessity of deciding the party's policies and so on keeping in mind all this was never taken up in the past. Naturally this would also reflect in practice. There would be a big advance. Then the question of the direction in which this is to be taken would come up. There was no such direction. On the one hand you are talking of revolution but on the other hand the ranks that you have gained are not having such a subjectivity, this sort of a consciousness.

Question: Isn't such a situation continuing today also?

K. Murali: I don't think it is continuing today because the difference is that of a revolutionary standpoint. Not only that, there is also the understanding of how that has to be applied in Keralam. Then there are the people who come forward with that understanding.

Question: In another sense if one is to put it, Keralam during the period of Emergency or in such a situation, whether Keralite society was ready for a revolution? I think it was not ready in that sense.

K. Murali: Yes, that is true.

Keralam's Particularities

Question: Similarly if today we were to ask whether Keralite society is ready for an armed revolution what would be the answer?

K. Murali: This is not a question of a society as a whole. There is unevenness existing in this society. There are regions, places in this society where sharp poverty exists. I cannot speak with exactness about the present situation in Keralam so I am not able to give further information. But so far as I understand Keralam is moving towards a severe crisis because of the

crash in rubber prices and other factors. All those factors that used to give expectations of a regular income are being lost. For example the shriveling up of the Gulf opportunity. There is the crisis that is going to come about because of all this. Because, to a great extent, this society was not relying on its own impulses but on that of others. The demand for rubber was an external demand, it was not the industrial demand of Keralam. If that demand falls or if they are able to source their rubber from some other place at a cheaper price, then Keralam's rubber is no longer necessary. So far as the Gulf is concerned, we have been playing the role of a service sector. We have been supplying the labour required by them. Once their necessities are fulfilled then there is no longer any demand for that. The necessity they face of giving work to their own countrymen, the economic stagnation they face, all of this is naturally leading to a situation where we are getting pushed out. The solution being sought out by our rulers to all this are projects like the industrial corridor. They are never a solution. Such programs only rehash dependence in a new form.

Part 7

The Stand on the National Question of Keralam

Question: Some original studies related to the national question, the economic structure of Keralam, took place during the CRC period. Studies which unraveled that Keralam is a part of the neocolonial economy. These sorts of studies haven't been carried out since then. It seems that everybody has abandoned that topic.

K. Murali: No, that's not so. The stand which was taken in that period—this was later self-critically rejected. That was one of revolutions on the basis of nationalities. Whose revolution, which class' revolution, this question was sticking out. If it's a revolution to be carried out under proletarian leadership, then it cannot be based on nationality. It's a matter to be settled with the state. An Indian state exists here. Then it is a question of a revolution taking place within this country that is India. It's a question of an Indian revolution itself. That was one of the issues. The other was that neocolonialism is eliminating feudalism. These two positions were rejected. But at the same time, the particularities of nationalities, cultural particularities, political particularities, their economic relations, the awareness about all of this was retained. If you look at the articles that came in

the *Munnaniporali* you will see that they were retained. They were not abandoned. But that doesn't amount to changing the party's strategic line as such. It led to an investigation about how the strategic line of that party should be applied in this particular situation. There are some things that are common and things that are particular.

The Maoist Party

Question: Perhaps it could be said that the contribution of Maoism lies in its putting forward the concept that the communist party may commit mistakes, that it could go against its very aims, instead of the view that the party will not commit mistakes. This view was different from that existing in Marxism, or communist practice, till then. But, quite often, things seem to be such that there is a situation where even those who claim to be a Maoist party have gone back.

K. Murali: There is unevenness. But there is no going back. To understand why this happens we must understand how these parties have been built up. The ideas guiding that process were not those of building up a Maoist party. Rather, concepts of the old Leninist party guided this, more or less. In this matter, the understanding about what Maoism's specific contribution is, came later. The Chinese Communist Party itself took up such a summarisation in 1974 or 1975, through the book "A Basic Understanding of the Chinese Communist Party Its circulation all over the world and getting studied and discussed by people, that again took place after some more time. So there is an unevenness in this. At the same time there are also efforts being made to assimilate it. There are the rectifications, corrections, self-criticisms that came through this.

Basic Concepts

Question: Some fundamental questions have been raised about this on many occasions. The evaluation made by the ML movement at the time of its formation, that is, concepts like semi-feudal, semi-colonial, comprador bourgeois, how far are they relevant in the present situation. In a situation where society is getting urbanised at a fast rate, how realistic is the view about a people's war carried out by building liberated areas in villages? Does semi-feudalism exist as an economic relation today? Don't all these changes demand theoretical re-examination?

K. Murali: The question of whether basic concepts have to be abandoned is an issue. Then there is also the issue of how these concepts are to be grasped today. How are they being concretised today and understood? These are two different issues. Regarding the first issue I don't think that these concepts have to be abandoned. Because I was able to discover many examples of the semi-feudalism existing here in the study I carried out about the agrarian relations existing in Kerala. Not in the old form. It is not the old semi-feudalism. Not the old caste-feudalism. But even then, caste-feudalism is existing in a new form in the economy and other spheres. It is present in social relations, in economic relations. This phenomenon of urbanisation, if statistics are closely examined, we can see that this evaluation is actually being made on the basis of the category of census towns. The definition of a census town is itself very weak. If the percentage of people becoming daily wagers exceeds a certain number, or a certain percentage of houses are of a specified area, this is how these figures are arrived at. Once the number of census towns increases another statistic is presented that says that the urban population has increased. But the actual extent of urbanisation is a matter of doubt. Is the growth of some market situated in the rural areas into a bigger center being mistaken as urbanisation? These things have yet to be sufficiently investigated.

The *Economic and Political Weekly* had bought out an issue solely devoted to census towns. I read it while in jail. What I saw in it is an intermingled state of affairs. I say it is intermingled because these developments have taken place depending on some other factors. The transition from rural to urban, the division of labour and local industries that have come up as a part of this, this is not the process that took place there. A road passing through, a bridge coming up—it is factors like these that have led to the emergence of these centers. So we must examine how far this talk about urbanisation is factual. Of course, there are now more towns than in the past. No quarrel about that. But there is the issue of its extent. The issue of whether there is urbanisation to the extent claimed. That is why I said I don't think this is a question of abandoning basic concepts.

Moreover, I think that the concept of bureaucrat capitalism needs to be studied deeper. Bureaucrat capitalism is a concept that was there from the beginning of the ML movement. But more studies haven't taken place. The CPI (Maoist) had accepted that this has to be studied. I don't know what happened later. I haven't been able to see any such document

of that nature. This bureaucrat capitalism Mao talked about is the specific type of capitalism created by imperialist countries in Third World countries. When it is said that its basic nature is that of serving imperialism and feudalism at the same time, then this is not a type of capitalism that will eliminate feudalism. It is one that is always intertwined with it. Then that brings up the issue that feudalism will be recreated in one form or the other. That is how it is taking place. This is something that has to be evaluated concretely.

Similarly the issue of the central slogan of the new democratic revolution and agrarian revolution, "land to the tiller It is asked whether this slogan is relevant in a period where people are moving away from agriculture. There is the question of why people are moving away from agriculture. The reason is that the income from agriculture is not sufficient. Not because they have lost interest in agriculture. On the contrary a situation has emerged where one cannot live depending on agriculture. A huge number of youngsters are coming to Keralam as migrant labour. Where is the money they earn going? What is it being turned into in the rural areas? It is being invested precisely in agriculture itself. To improve their holding or buy land or if they were having a thatched house to renovate or improve it. Their earnings are going into these sorts of things. It is not transforming into capital. This is not just because their income is not sufficient for that. The opportunity to accumulate and direct it in that direction does not exist.

So, as I said earlier, at the level of concepts, I am of the view that they are correct. But how it is existing today, what tactical approach should be adopted and such things should certainly be studied and formulated in relation to each concrete situation. There is no dispute there. But I don't think that a fundamental change has taken place in basic relations. I couldn't see that sort of an indication in the articles I have read in the EPW too. In one of its issues it carried comparative essays on studies carried out by various social scientists or their students in villages they had investigated fifty years ago. They say that there is both change and no-change. True, things have changed from what was seen in the past. But there is no change in some basic things. Particularly, in things related to caste, landlordism or feudalism, that continues without change. I think that this common picture will be seen everywhere.

Question: You have been involved in UG [underground] activities or put in

jail for long periods during your 40-50 years long political life. People who worked along with you have left. In this situation how do you assess the isolation one experiences in this situation?

K. Murali: I have never experienced it as isolation. I have only thought about it as something that happens in any revolutionary movement. Feeling isolated or alone, these sorts of problems were never there. Moreover even while UG, I always had a lot to do. Reading, writing, meeting and talking to comrades, doing investigation, I was always engaged in something or the other. There never was an occasion where I had to sit idle and kill time or be isolated. I didn't face that while in jail also. Rather I was thinking that I am not getting sufficient time, I mean to carry out and complete all the things I was planning to do.



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